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Imagining Russian sexualities in a queer world

Gay.ru: Imagining Russian Sexualities in a Queer World

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Abstract:

This thesis examines the role of Russia's largest queer-themed website, gay.ru, within the queer community in Russia. The site was founded in the early 1990s as a message board and grew in popularity, being re-founded as a website in September 1997. Nowadays the site boasts 3 million hits a year and contains around 15,000 articles. As such it has been named 'as one of Russia's most important queer websites'.

The first chapter of this paper establishes the current situation regarding queer rights in Russia and sets gay.ru within this historical context. The second chapter shows how gay.ru is vital for the queer community and the way in which Russian queers interact and communicate with each other. In doing so, this chapter builds upon recent scholarship examining the internet's role in queer lives and how queer communities across the world have appropriated the internet and how this relates to gay.ru's current situation.

The third chapter examines gay.ru within the context of the globalisation of sexualities. Scholarship over the past few decades has pointed to a global, connected queer community, modelled on an American style consumerism and queer culture. This chapter also reflects on how gay.ru has become globalised over the course of its history and how this presents a contrast with scholarly work from the 1990s, e.g., Laurie Essig. The fourth chapter reflects upon gay.ru and its role in re-examining Russian history with a queer eye. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian queer community has sought to have itself recognised as a distinct remembering collective with regards to Soviet atrocities. This chapter then examines how gay.ru seeks to place the queer community as a remembering collective.

Acknowledgements and Dedication

Firstly, I would like to thank both Connor and Debbie for their support and help during this past year and throughout my undergraduate degree. Without their help, I would not have had the confidence to start this journey or see it through to the end.

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Finally, I would like to thank my parents and family, who have always supported me and allowed me to be who I am and want to be.

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: THOMAS EDWARD SAUNDERS DATE: 24/09/2019

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Gay.ru is Russia's largest queer-themed website, reportedly receiving 3 million visits a year. The site's creator, Ed Mishin, took advantage of the more favourable situation for queer people caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the legalisation of homosexuality by Yeltsin in 1993 to set up the site in 1997. Since then it has functioned as an online community where queer people can read news stories and queer-interest pieces aimed at educating the queer community in "vitally important topics" such as safe-sex techniques and coping with homophobia. The site is divided into various sub-sections such as obshchestvo [society], nauka [knowledge], and stil' zhizni [lifestyle], where the visitor can find articles relating to different aspects of queer culture. Through these various sub-sections, members of the queer community in Russia can interact with each other and have formed an online safe space in which they can explore their sexuality and identity, find help, and even love and sex. The site traces its origin to a series of message boards on the Moscow FIDO network aimed at gay men created in the early 1990s. Ed Mishin came up with the idea for this message board after a trip to the United States where he came across a similar one. As the message boards became more and more popular, he decided to create a website, to be called gay.ru. However, the domain name gay.ru was already taken by another queer activist, who eventually gave Mishin the rights to the name and he went live with the site in September 1997.

I argue that gay.ru has become an important part of the development of the queer community in Russia, reflecting how the community itself has evolved and also acting as an agent for this change. In the early years, the site was small, containing only a few pages of information on queer life in Russia. Nowadays, the site is a large, sprawling website, containing a variety of pages dedicated not just to queer life in Russia, but also to sharing news and events from across

the queer world. The site contains articles discussing a range of topics from safe-sex and staying safe online to articles about the secret queer bars in 18th Century Russia. As well as providing a space where queer people in Russia can come together and share experiences and explore their sexuality and identity, gay.ru also reflects the globalisation of the queer community. The site has also become important in terms of the queer community's memory of the Soviet Union and how its past is remembered. This dissertation will examine gay.ru as a reflection of the queer community in Russia and how the site has adapted and changed with the wider community.

Since 2013 and the introduction of the so-called "anti-gay propaganda" laws the Russian queer community has faced an increase in intolerance towards queer rights and queer people. Due to this law, the work of queer organisations and activists, including gay.ru, has been severely restricted and any attempts to disseminate knowledge and information about the queer community have been met with state and popular backlash. More recently, however, gay.ru has become the target of government censors after the implementation of the law. In early 2018, the site was told by the Russian government to delete information that was in violation of the law but was not given any indication as to what sort of information this was. By the end of 2018, however, the site had been blocked in Russia and had changed its domain name in order to get around the government censorship.

1.1 Anti-gay feelings in Russia

The anti-gay propaganda law came after an increase in anti-LGBT+ rhetoric from members of the Russian government. In 2002 there was a debate in the Russian Duma to re-criminalise both male and female homosexuality; these proposals did not pass (Healey, 2018: 7). Instead, conservative elements in Russian politics now seek to suppress homosexuality and have turned to

suppressing visible acts of homosexuality (Healey, 2018: 7). For example, ever since Moscow's first planned gay pride parade in 2005, the authorities have sought to ban it (Stella, 2013: 471). Pride parades organised by queer activists to acknowledge the 2009 Eurovision Song Contest hosted in Moscow were used as an opportunity to protest the treatment of LGBT Russians by the state and to counter claims by the mayor of Moscow, Iurii Luzhkov, that homosexuality is 'satanic' (Sky News, 2009). These pride parades led Moscow city authorities to ban parades by pride activists in following years (Stella, 2013: 478). The visible presence of, and suppression of, queer voices occurred during the time when a wave of anti-gay propaganda laws were firstly tried and tested at a regional level beginning in 2006 (Healey, 2018: 9). By 2012 the calls for a national law regarding gay propaganda had reached the Duma (Healey, 2018: 12). The bill, spearheaded by Duma Deputy Elena Mizulina, was passed by a large majority of deputies and came into force in June 2013 (Healey, 2018: 13).

It is not just the state that openly expresses its intolerance to homosexuality, as many Russians hold negative opinions on the queer community too. A 2015 poll carried out by Levada Centre revealed that 37% of those sampled believed that homosexuality was 'an illness, which must be medically treated' and 26% believed that it was a 'bad habit' (Levada Centre, 2015). Many members of the government have voiced the opinion that homosexuality constitutes a "non-traditional sexual orientation" and goes against the values of the Russian state (Healey, 2018: 15). President Putin has also indicated that any recognition of sexual minorities in Russia would go against national interests (Stella, 2013: 474). This attitude that sees homosexuality as un-Russian reflects the idea that homosexuality is a Western import. For Russia, the idea of a 'global gay' (which I shall explore later in this work) has become the symbol of Western cultural imperialism and many Russians see homosexuality as a 'non-native' sexual orientation (Baer, 2006: 6).

This anti-Western trend as a whole is something that has marked Putin-era Russia. The end of the Soviet Union saw the end of the state's silence surrounding sex and sexuality. Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of g*lasnost'* allowed the media to acknowledge sex and the discussion of sex in all its forms 'became a badge of "post-ness", post Sovietness, of life after Communism' (Healey, 2018: 105). After the Union finally collapsed in 1991 and Boris Yeltsin came to power in Russia, Article 121 was quietly removed from the new Russian legal code (Healey, 2018: 7). This new-found "Western" sexual freedom gave Russian homosexuals the hope that tolerance and acceptance might be just around the corner and this period in Russian queer history can be seen as an unprecedented era of freedom for the queer community in Russia (Healey, 2018: 108). It was at this time that Western queer activists began to flock to Russia to help organise a Western-style queer movement and when Mishin founded what was later to become gay.ru after a trip to the US and an encounter with an American message board for queer men[1]. However, as Healey notes, queer activists were unable to create lasting organisations to support Russia's fledgling queer community (Healey, 2018: 108).

1.2 Looking backwards

Russia's recent history with homosexuality suggests a long tradition of homophobic actions and laws. However, homophobia was not always prevalent in Russia. Foreign travellers to pre-Petrine Muscovy report that Muscovites were 'unable to resist' 'deviant sexual acts', i.e., sodomy between males (Poe, 2008: 418). In fact, not until Peter the Great's series of westernising reforms did sodomy become illegal. It was during his westernisation of the army (basing his laws on the Swedish model of army discipline) that sodomy between soldiers was criminalised (Kon,

[1] Gay.ru's 'museum section', available at: http://www.xgay.ru/reklama/about/museum/how.html [accessed 15 December 2019].

1993: 89). This law, however, only applied to those in the army, with the first civilian laws prohibiting sodomy between males appearing during the reign of Nicholas I in 1832 (Kon, 1993: 89). Homosexuality remained illegal through the nineteenth century but was legalised when the Tsarist legal code was abolished by the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution (Kozlovskii, 1984: 150).

The Bolshevik legalisation of homosexuality in 1918 has caused much debate among Western scholars, with Kozlovskii noting that many Western authors saw this step as a conscious part of the 'social revolution' (Kozlovskii, 1984: 151). Simon Karlinsky, however, believes that the legalisation of male homosexuality in the Soviet Union was merely a benign oversight, pointing out that the removal of the Tsarist legal code legalised rape, incest, and murder (Karlinsky, 1991: 357). Dan Healey, on the other hand, agrees with Kozlovskii's assertion that the legalisation of homosexuality in the Soviet Union was a conscious decision. Healey's studies of the draft copies of the Bolsheviks' legal codes show that 'Left Socialist Revolutionary jurists deliberately eliminated the ban on consensual sodomy in their proposed criminal code' (Healey, 2001: 125). Whilst there are 'no records of substantive debate', the draft legal codes worked on by the jurists after the Revolution show the same 'clear explicit decision' (Healey, 2001: 115: 125). This decision, according to Healey, can be seen by the comments made on the legal codes which show a support for the 'secularization' of the codes which was a 'fundamental principle of […] penal reform' (Healey, 2001: 121). This made the Soviet Union one of the first countries to legalise homosexuality, something that was boasted about at conferences on sex during the 1920s and early 1930s by Soviet scientists (Kozlovskii, 1984: 151). Despite this, Soviet medical science in this period still believed that homosexuality was an illness that needed to be treated (Kon, 1993: 91). Izrael Gel'man, a Soviet sexologist, studied the sexual behaviour of Moscow university

students in the 1920s. In his report, he commented that homosexuality is a psychological illness and that the whole world of a homosexual was 'perverted' (Gel'man, 1923: 122).

The relative tolerance of the state in its legal stance did not last for long. Homosexuality was never compatible with the state's idea of what the ideal Soviet citizen should be – the so called *New Soviet Man*, which was the idea that all Soviet citizens should become 'a rational, conscious, collectivist worker' in order to build the ideal utopian, Soviet society (Shaw, 2011: 13). Due to the incompatibility of homosexuality with the idea of the *New Soviet Man*, the Stalinist 1930s saw male homosexuality criminalised again in 1934 with the introduction of an anti-sodomy law (Healey, 2018: 158). The law was first suggested in September 1933, when Genrikh Iagoda, the deputy chief of the OGPU, wrote to Stalin calling for a law against 'pederasts' (Healey, 2018: 158). Iagoda's call for an anti-sodomy law was as a result of raids conducted in Moscow, Leningrad, and other cities on "pederast" rings that were accused of 'spying' and 'politically demoralizing young men' (Healey, 2018: 159). This 'homophobic turn', as Dan Healey calls it, was part of Stalin's wider retreat to a more pro-family-values rhetoric. In the same period, he criminalised abortions, made it more difficult to obtain a divorce, and marriage was given a prominent position in state rhetoric (Fitzpatrick, 1999: 142; Prozorov, 2012: 132).

Whilst the reforms of Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, are often thought of as a moment of liberalisation in the Soviet Union, this was not the case for its homosexual community (Healey, 2018: 44-45). Furthermore, Khrushchev's review of the Stalinist legal code, which resulted in the removal of several of Stalin's legal statutes, led to the 'strengthening of the struggle against sodomy.' (Healey, 2018: 170). This renewed struggle against sodomy led to around 14,000 people being convicted of sodomy between 1961 and 1981 in Soviet Russia alone (Healey, 2018: 171). The surge in sodomy convictions in the USSR was inflated by the increased police effort in rooting

out homosexuals. The local police forces in towns and cities would patrol known homosexual spaces and made use of informants, usually caught-in-the-act homosexuals, to denounce former lovers (Healey, 2018: 171).

Since the passing of the 2013 anti-gay propaganda law, the queer community in Russia and Russia's relationship with it has come under intense, Western, media scrutiny, reflecting the idea that homosexuality and queer rights are a Western import. In the run-up the 2014 Winter Olympics and the 2018 FIFA World Cup, both hosted by Russia, the situation for LGBT Russians and visitors were hot topics in the Western media. The BBC reported in June 2018, shortly before the World Cup's kick-off, that there were 'safety fears for gay fans heading to Russia' (BBC News, 2018) and *The Guardian* reported that English football fans were in danger of homophobic attacks (*The Guardian*, 2018). In addition, many Western leaders, such as the German president, the US president and the UK prime minister, all boycotted the opening ceremony of the Sochi Winter Olympics because of Russia's human rights record (which was also a protest against the anti-gay propaganda law) and the recent crisis in Ukraine (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 2014).

I have recounted here a brief history of homosexuality in Russia as this dissertation will add another chapter to that history by looking at how queer people in Russia today use websites such as gay.ru to express their sexuality. Not only will this dissertation look at the history of how gay.ru helped to form a queer community in Russia, it will examine how wider issues in the global queer community, such as the globalisation of sexualities, affect Russian queers. This work documents how gay.ru has become globalised over its history and has taken on a more Western outlook, just as other non-Western queer communities have done over the last three decades or so (see Altman, 1996). This history of homosexuality also appears as part of a wider history of Russia

on gay.ru and as such this work will examine how gay.ru relays the (queer) history of Russia and how it remembers the Russian queer past.

1.3 Looking forwards

In Russia today, the queer community has no voice and no visible presence due to the state's suppression of queer people and queer rights using the anti-gay propaganda law. At times like these it is imperative that queer people have access to a safe space where they can anonymously explore their sexuality without judgement and fear. Gay.ru provides this safe space where queer people from all over Russia, and indeed the Russian-speaking world, can explore their identity and feel connected to their community.

With the site as popular as it is among the Russian queer community (the site claims 3 million visits a year), it can be taken as representing the development and the evolution of the wider queer community itself. In this project I will be looking at gay.ru as the driving force behind the creation of a visible Russian queer community by examining the site's various sub-sections from throughout its history to determine how gay.ru has helped to build a community in Russia. I will determine how these sites invite the user to connect with the community from wherever they are in Russia and the former Soviet Union by looking at sections of the site such as *ishchu druga [I'm looking for a friend], BBS [Bulletin Board System]* and *siti-gid [city guide]*. In doing so, I will also examine to what extent gay.ru does actually cater for the entire queer community in Russia or whether it is dominated by queer men. I will also look at how gay.ru has become a part of the 'global gay' and how this has affected the site in terms of imagery and advertising. I will then examine the impact this globalisation has on the Russian queer community, with reference to the adoption of 'Western sexual cultures.' This project will then look at gay.ru's reshaping of

Russian history with a ‘queer eye’ and how it tells the history of the Russian queer community in order to establish that community as part of Russia’s history. Gay.ru has also been important in attempting to fill the ‘memory-gap’ that exists in the history of the Russian queer community and its persecution under the Soviet regime, and I will also look at how gay.ru seeks to fill this gap.

1.4 Methodology

In order to examine how gay.ru and the wider queer community in Russia has evolved since the site’s inception, I will use the WayBack Machine. This online tool is an archive of millions of websites from across the world, allowing the user to search and view pages from various points across a website’s history.

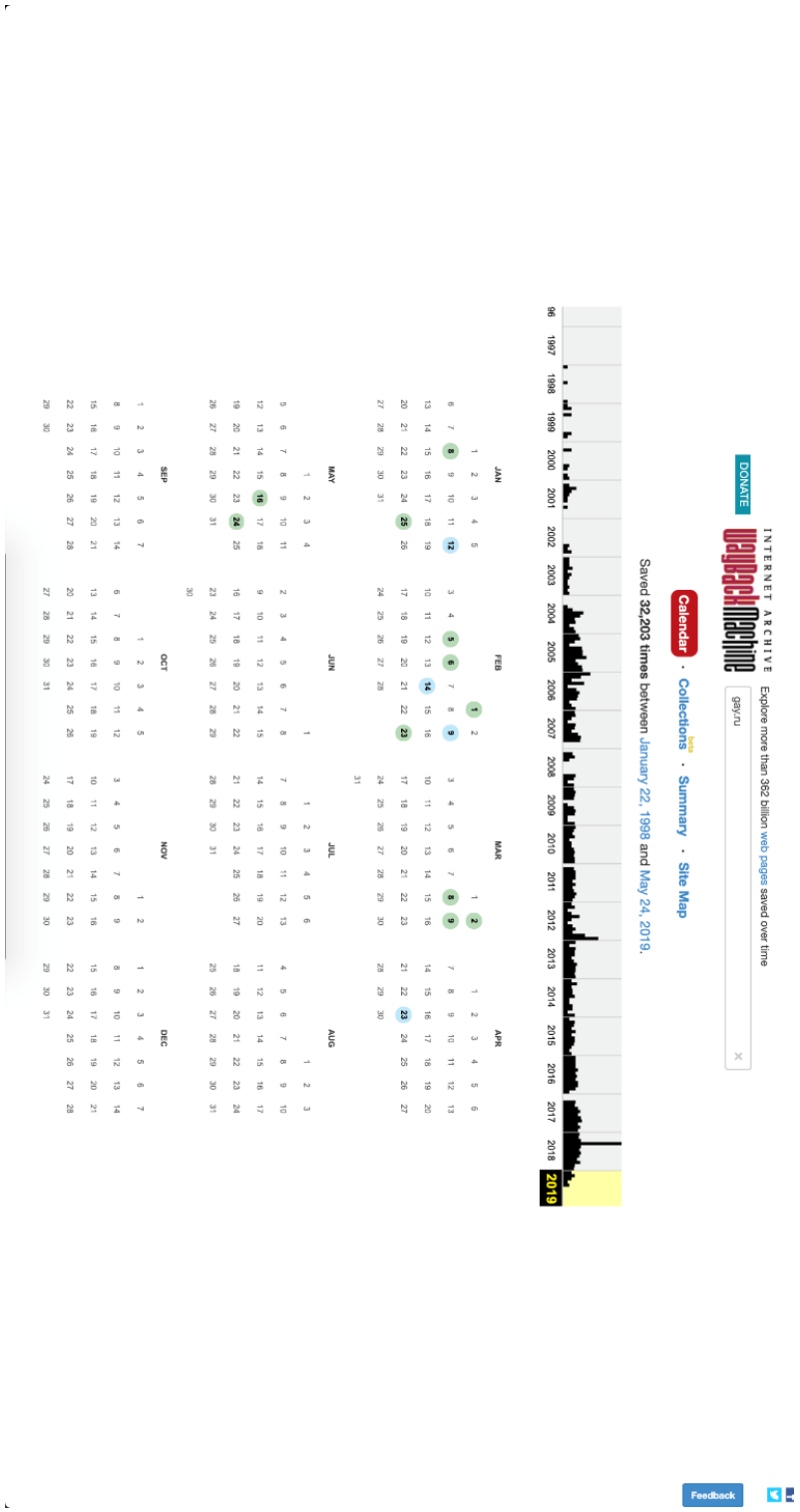

Figure no. 1 is a screenshot of the WayBack Machine showing how often gay.ru has been archived since 1998.[2]

[2] *Taken using the WayBack Machine, at* https://web.archive.org/web/*/gay.ru, accessed 15th December 2019).

One of the drawbacks of the WayBack Machine is the inconsistency with which the site's pages are archived, as noted by Liladhar R. Pendse (2014: 185). This limitation creates some problems when trying to trace the site's evolution, as key changes in the site might have been missed. On the other hand, however, the total number of the site's pages that have been archived since 1998 is 32,203, meaning the site has been archived roughly 1,500 times per year, This, I believe, is sufficient to accurately trace the changes in the way the site works and the changes in its content.

By using the WayBack Machine, I have looked back at the site throughout its evolution and have selected sections of the site that allow members of the queer community in Russia to connect with each other. From this, I then examine each section over the course of the site's history, considering how these sections have changed and how the site seeks to form a queer community by looking at what the section specifically offers: does it allow users to interact with each other or does it provide information about the community in the offline world? Examining these sections and how they have evolved over the years allows me to see to what extent gay.ru forms a queer community.

Furthermore, this project will be informed by recent scholarship on internet sites as communities themselves, as well as how queer people from across the world interact with the internet. This research on internet use among queer people, as well as recent scholarship on queer theory and how queer cultures have spread across the world, also inform this work. Using this scholarship, I critically analyse the various sub-sections of the site in order to see how it builds a queer community and how it has become a conduit for the globalisation of Russian sexualities. Dan Healey's recent work on queer memory in Russia also influences this work and using his work, this dissertation examines how gay.ru contributes to the preservation of queer memory in Russia.

1.5 Justification of the research

This thesis will look at the largest queer-themed website in the Russian speaking world, gay.ru. The site receives tens of thousands of hits per day and has become a centre-piece of the queer movement in Russia[3]. With the suppression of queer activism becoming more widespread in Russia since 2013, this project will look at the ways in which gay.ru supports the queer community and queer activism in Russia. This thesis is the first to detail the evolution of gay.ru and examine its impact on the queer community in Russia. Over the 20 or so years, various studies have been conducted on how the internet can support online and offline communities and the internet's use among queer people (For example, Wakeford, 2002; Groom and Pennebaker, 2005; Puller and Cooper, 2010; Nip, 2014; Grov et al, 2014; Kavoura, 2014; Formby 2017). This literature has provided a large amount of information on how people use the internet to form a community based upon common interests. Some of this scholarship, such as Grov et al, Groom and Pennebaker, and Puller and Copper, focuses on the internet as a tool used by queer people to explore their identity, meet other queer people, and form relationships. This dissertation uses many of the observations noted by these scholars and applies them to gay.ru to see how the site has helped to form a queer community in Russia.

This dissertation also examines to what extent the queer community of Russia has been affected by the globalisation of sexualities and sexual cultures. In 1999, Laurie Essig suggested in her book, *Queer in Russia*, that queer Russians were rejecting the influence and ideas of Western queer movements and the activists that attempted to found them. However, David Altman noted in 1996 that many non-Western queer cultures were being affected by American queer culture. He

[3] The Gay.ru English language site, available at: http://english.gay.ru/about/ [accessed, 15th December 2019].

noted the rise of the 'global gay' and how Western, commercialised sexual cultures were slowly replacing 'native' queer cultures (Altman, 1996: 77-78). Other scholars, such as Long, 2005, have noticed the increasing cooperation between queer communities across the world who all fight for a common goal of equal queer rights. In is in this context that this dissertation examines to what extent gay.ru has been affected by the increasing interconnected-ness of queer communities and movements.

More recently, Dan Healey's work, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* (2018), identified a 'memory-less LGBT movement' and discusses the need for queer groups in Russia to preserve the memories of the Russian queer community's history (2018: 23). He highlights the fact that Russian queers have been struggling to have themselves recognised as a legitimate remembering collective within the context of Soviet political terror (2018: 149). However, he does note that there are some organisations that seek to collect queer memories of the Soviet Union and commemorate queer victims of political repression, such as Elena Gusiantinskaya's Archive of Lesbians and Gays (2018: 205). Despite gay.ru's attempts to collect and publish articles relating to the queer experience under the Soviet regime, gay.ru was not mentioned as an agent in the preservation of queer memory. Therefore, this project also seeks to examine how gay.ru attempts to reverse this memoryless-ness, through its collection of scholarly and journalistic articles. By looking at how gay.ru presents the history of Russian with a "queer-eye", as well as the site's attempts to document and publish accounts of the Soviet persecution of the queer community, this project looks at how gay.ru seeks to constitute queer Russians as one of the remembering collectives.

1.6 Terminology

Throughout this work, I will refer to the LGBT+ community as the queer community. The word 'queer' has troubling connotations when referring to people of the LGBT+ community and some people believe that the word 'queer' cannot so easily be reclaimed (Beemyn & Eliason, 1996: 5). However, Beemyn and Eliason defend the use of 'queer', as they feel that:

> queer best characterises our own personal beliefs, and potentially leaves room for all people who are attracted to others of the same sex or whose bodies or sexual desires do not fit dominant standards of gender and/or sexuality.(1996: 5)

The rise of the term 'queer' in academic studies represents the idea that 'queer studies is the institutionalization of a new […] paradigm for thinking about sexuality', and allows scholars to represent and examine more sexual identities than simply 'gay, lesbian and bisexual' (Hall & Jagose, 2013: xvi). There is also a precedent within the Russian studies community for referring to the Russian LGBT+ community as 'queer'. Laurie Essig, in her work *Queer in Russia* (1999), which focuses on sexual and gender identity in post-Soviet Russia, uses the word queer throughout her study. Essig argues that, whilst she also feels the word queer is often troublesome, it best describes 'the fuzziness and inclusiveness' of Russian language terms for LGBT+ people (1999: x). She also argues that queer is the best term to describe the 'nonnormative sexual practices in Russia' (1999: x). Dan Healey also uses the term 'queer […] as shorthand for the broad spectrum of practices and identities that deviate from normative heterosexuality' (2018: 20).

Although Essig's work has been criticised (see Baer, 2002) and I agree that the word queer has a somewhat troublesome connotation, I find it has the best fit for describing the myriad of

sexual and gender identities. Because of this, I will refer to the LGBT+ community in Russia as the queer community and people whose sexual and gender identities fall into this broad category also as queer.

Chapter 2 – The Site and its Community

In this section I will examine how gay.ru seeks to build a queer community in Russia. Since the site's creation in September 1997, the site has contained various sub-sections which allow the user to explore the site's content in a fairly structured way. Figure no.2 is a screenshot of the earliest available image of gay.ru from January 1998. In this image, we can see how differently the site appears in comparison to its modern version and that the site is less orientated towards queer-themed news. At the bottom of the page, the user can see links to gay.ru's different sections. In 1998, the site contained sub-sections entitled 'homo and phobia', 'rainbow news', 'show and tell', and 'gays in the city'. On the current site, users are presented with news articles relating to queer events from all over the world and a range of sub-sections that are further divided into smaller, more focused categories. Today, the user can read articles on sexual health, fashion, the army, safety online, and history.

This chapter firstly looks at gay.ru's aims and how the site goes on to achieve these aims within its various sections. In doing so, I examine gay.ru as an online community and look at recent scholarship on the development and expansion of the internet as a place where people can come together and can share experiences that unite them. Using the WayBack machine, this chapter examines early versions of the site and how some of its sub-sections have developed over time and how these help to form a community. In this chapter, I look at the sections *ishchu druga! [I'm looking for a friend/boyfriend], znakomstvo [connection/acquaintance], siti-gid [city-guide],* and *golubaya volna [blue wave].* These sections all allow queer people to connect with each other, whether in the virtual world or in the real world. Using recent scholarship on websites as a community and how queer people use the internet to interact with each other, I analyse each section to see how gay.ru has contributed to building a community in Russia. In this chapter, I also examine

how gay.ru keeps its users safe from potential homophobic attacks whilst using the site and meeting new friends. I also examine to what extent gay.ru is a safe space for the whole queer community in Russia. Gay.ru refers to itself as *the Russian Server of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people,* however, I argue that gay.ru does not necessarily constitute a safe space for all of the queer community.

Figure no.2 shows gay.ru's front page on 22nd January 1998. [4]

[4] Taken using the WayBack Machine, available at https://web.archive.org/web/19980122111606/http://www.gay.ru/, [accessed 15th December 2019].

2.1 Gay.ru and its aims

On gay.ru's English-language page, 'about us', Ed Mishin lays out the site's mission statement as:

a place where our gay, lesbian, and questioning visitors can find such **vitally important information** as psychological aspects of coming out, coping with homophobia, safer-sex techniques; real-life stories of fellow gays and lesbians and receive a response to their questions (emphasis as in the original).

The screenshot (figure no. 2) shows the front page of the website on 22nd January 1998, shortly after it went online. The early site appears dramatically different to its modern-day self, not just in appearance but also content. The early site is much more focused on the Russian gay community itself, whereas the modern site also focuses on news pertaining to LGBT rights across the world, which suggests that the site's outlook has become more globalised and international since its founding (as discussed in Chapter 3). At the bottom of the page appear the links for the different sections of the website. Here the user can find information on homophobia, health, and many other queer topics. The section '*chto my tut delaem'* (what we do here) reveals the website's goals as creating a space where queer people, not just in Russia but also the wider Russian-speaking community, can discuss the problems that worry them, such as their sexuality. This reveals that the site's original goals were orientated to building a community for queer people in Russia and to raising awareness of the issues that affect them.

By browsing the many sub-sections of the website, such as society, lifestyle, people, science, and more, visitors can find information on a multitude of topics. For example, they can find articles on coming-out, read how other people have come to terms with their sexuality and

find information on safe-sex practices and, indeed, sex in general. Through these aims the site seeks to provide a safe space where visitors can find useful information which helps with their process of identity formation. In this way, the internet and indeed the website itself, have become what Joseph Clift termed 'tools' through which the Russian queer community can come to terms with and learn about their sexuality (2010: 263).

2.2 Gay.ru as an online queer community

I argue that alongside gay.ru's aims to create a safe space with 'vitally important' information on coming to terms with one's sexuality, gay.ru has been pivotal in the creation of a larger Russian queer community. Yet, what do we define as a community? There are many different theoretical notions behind the idea of a community. Firstly, a community is 'typically […] understood to be highly spatialized' (Formby, 2017: 2). Scholars often talk of a community having a shared geography and physical space (Willmott, 1986, as cited by Formby 2017: 3). This notion of a geographical area functioning as a community has also been applied to queer studies, with the early studies of homosexuality focusing on 'urban sociology' (Formby, 2017: 3). Queer neighbourhoods are often focused upon a few streets and have visible signs of queer-ness such as pride flags and a high concentration of queer residences and queer-owned businesses (Ghaziani, 2014: 2).

Benedict Anderson's idea of an *imagined community* arguably fits this study of community better as I argue that gay.ru creates an *imagined queer community* in Russia. Anderson's concept of the *imagined community* was originally used to describe the origin of nationalism. He argues that even the 'smallest nation' is imagined because the members of nation 'will never know most

of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of the them (1991: 6). Despite this distant relationship, the thing that unites them into a community is the 'deep, horizontal comradeship' (Anderson, 1991: 7). What he argues here is that it is identity that unites the community: the belonging to a certain something, whether that be religion, ethnicity, or even sexual identity. Scholars such as David Bell and Gill Valentine have used Anderson's ideas in their studies of visible queer communities (Formby, 2017: 6). They observed that most queer people do not live with other queer people and instead live in an imagined community (as cited by Formby, 2017: 6). Jeffrey Weeks also argues that a queer community is formed through the shared experiences of living life as a queer person (1996: 77). More recently, studies have looked at social media's role in creating an imagined community online (see Kavoura, 2014). Social media, Kavoura argues, creates an imagined community through the bringing together of people with a shared interest and using a 'shared language' (2014: 500). It is this exchange of ideas and content and interaction with other users that makes social media an imagined community, as many of the users will never meet each other or even interact with each other, but it is their shared interests that unite them (Gruzd, et al., 2011: 1298).

The development and adoption of the internet has presented queer communities with numerous new opportunities. Even twenty years ago, the internet was said to have revolutionised the way that the queer community interacts (Haag and Chang, 1997: 85). It affords the queer community with a space where they can safely and, importantly, anonymously explore their sexual and gender identities without needing to leave their own homes (Haag and Chang, 1997: 85). Research conducted on other queer-orientated websites, such as Hanckel and Morris, have shown that queer websites help to reduce marginalisation and isolation by uniting queer people from across a country or indeed the world (2014: 878). Because of this widespread adoption of the

internet by the queer community, many queer people have seen their online interactions with the queer community increase and their offline interactions decrease (Rosser et al., 2008: 590). These websites that have sprung up across the internet that cater to different subsections of the queer community are themselves communities because they unite their users via their shared interests.

Armstrong and Hagel studied four different types of online community; communities of transaction; communities of interest; communities of fantasy; communities of relationship (2000: 85). I believe that gay.ru has elements of all four. Armstrong and Hagel define a community of interest as a community where people 'interact extensively about specific topics of interest. Participants not only carry out transactions with one another, but their interactions are generally focused on a specific topic area', in this case their sexual identity (2000: 85). A community of relationship 'centres on intense personal experiences and generally adheres to making identities anonymous. […] Participants discuss the pain associated with these experiences, talk about how to deal with personal issues' (Armstrong and Hagel, 2000: 85). The community of fantasy allows 'the participants to create new personalities, environments or stories of fantasy' and a community of transaction facilitates the buying and selling (Armstrong and Hagel, 2000: 85). As part of gay.ru's aims, the site wants to create a space where visitors can discuss their personal experiences with violence and homophobia. Users can comment on articles and therefore share their own experiences and they can also contribute to the site's literature forum (discussed later).

В НАЧАЛО ПОИСК

ru.sex.gay

О российских геях и лесбиянках

Ищу друга!

"Ищу друга", "ищу партнера", "ищу кого-нибудь из Перми", "32/43/23 – отзовись" – примеры обычных объявлений. Многим из нас не хватает друзей, недостаточно общения, особенно "тематического", про однополые отношения. Тем не менее, **не хотелось бы**, чтобы объявления в этой рубрике касались только поисков потенциальных сексуальных партнеров. Может быть, кто захочет просто рассказать о себе, познакомиться своей страничкой, сообщить, что готов обмениваться книгами или видеокассетами, да мало ли еще чего. А если уж вы решили написать именно "ищу друга!", то постарайтесь избегать пустого перечисления своих физических и географических параметров. Вы ведь ищете Друга, а не чтобы переспать на один раз. Или я ошибаюсь?

Желающие могут присылать вместе с объявлением свою фотографию. Те, кто уже разместил объявление, также могут прислать фото. Кстати, если вы не увидели своего объявления в очередном обновлении -- пожалуйста, сделайте его менее похожим на страшку от врача и пришлите еще разок.

Присылайте наши объявления и фотографии на адрес: [illegible]

У вас нет файла с фотографией, но вы хотели бы иметь его, чтобы поместить на эту доску или отослать виртуальным друзьям? Это не проблема. Пришлите ее по адресу **109457, Москва, а/я 1** и мы бесплатно оцифруем ее (фотографии не возвращаются). На этот адрес также могут присылать объявления те, у кого нет электронного адреса.

Если вы **не хотите, чтобы "светился"** ваш электронный адрес, то почитайте ответы на [illegible]

Figure no.3 shows the front page of the section' ishchu druga' [I'm looking for a friend/boyfriend] from January 1998.[5]

[5] Taken using the WayBack Machine, available at https://web.archive.org/web/19980122112820/http://www.gay.ru/friends/home.htm, [accessed 15th December 2019].

2.3 I'm looking for a friend/boyfriend

One way in which the site functioned as a community of interest is through the section '*ishchu druga' (looking for a friend).* This section appears on the early version of the website, but had become the love.gay.ru section (discussed below) by 2005. This section of the site invited people to search for friends and was not intended as portal through which the queer community could find sexual partners, instead it was billed as a place to network:

'"*I'm searching for a friend/boyfriend", "searching for a partner", "searching for someone from Perm" […] Many of us don't have enough friends, or conversations about same-sex relations.* ***I don't want this area to be necessarily dedicated to the search for potential sexual partners.*** *It could be perhaps that you want to talk about yourself, […] announce that you're ready to exchange books or video cassettes, or something else perhaps.' (emphasis my own).*

This description appears on the website in January 1998. This shows that the site wanted to help connect the queer community across Russia and help build a community in places where one does not exist. Through this section of the site users were able to search for adverts from a list of cities across Russia. Many of the adverts (such as the one in figure no. 3) related to the wish to find friends and build connections. In many of the smaller towns, such as Samara and Izhevsk, only one advert appears.

This section is important for the queer community in Russia as it allows people from across Russia's vast area to connect with each other: not just in the online realm but also offline as local connections become more personal in nature. As mentioned earlier online communities are often turned to by users to combat isolation. For a long time, a large queer community existed only in Moscow and St Petersburg, with only very small or no queer community at all in other cities across

Russia (Buyantueva, 2017: 461). With the advent of the internet, and sites such as gay.ru, queer people in smaller towns and cities were able to communicate with one another and gain a 'deeper awareness' of queer identity and culture (Buyantueva, 2017: 461). This section of the site helps to combat marginalisation and isolation encountered by queer people in smaller towns and cities across Russia as it allowed them to contact people in the nearby area with whom they could interact and build an offline relationship. One of the downsides to this section of the site was the location factor. Many of the cities to which adverts were grouped were the larger population centres of Russia's many federal subjects and the larger cities of Russian-speaking countries (Alma-Ata being the only Kazakh city to appear on the list and Minsk the only Belarusian. However this is perhaps because these republics may have their own national websites specific to their country, for example gay.lv and gaynet.lt in Latvia and Lithuania respectively).

Another drawback of this section of the site is internet use in Russia. At the time of gay.ru's founding everyday internet use among Russians was extremely small. According to the Levada Centre (2018b), only 4% of Russians used the internet regularly in 1998 (defined as anything from every day to once a week). What this means is that the number of queer people that used the site regularly at this time is likely to be very small. But as the internet became much more widely used in Russia, queer people from even Russia's most remote regions could contact this imagined community. Although the internet did not necessarily create a physical, geographical space in these small, remote towns for the queer community to meet, it did provide an online space where the community was able to share ideas. In this way and through this section, gay.ru could be taking over the 'vanguard' status from Moscow and St Petersburg, and provided a safe space, where the queer community could express itself, anonymously, without fear of persecution. However, this section proved popular with people despite the small number of internet users in Russia at the time.

win | koi

ВНАЧАЛО ПОИСК

ru.sex.gay

о российских геях и лесбиянках

Ищу друга!

Работа из других городов

ОБЪЯВЛЕНИЯ отсылайте на ed@gay.ru

15 января '97

Мне 28. Живу в далеком городе Ижевске. Родине автомата Калашникова. И вот уже несколько лет пытаюсь найти друга. Не парня на один день, а именно друга. В нашем случае проблема не из легких. Если ты из Ижевска пиши. Буду чертовски рад. Хотя я думаю ты понимаешь, что мы вряди сразу бросимся в объятия друг другу. Не буду кажкой если скажу что элемент привлекательности имеет не малое значение.

Давай знакомиться. anteyG0@hotmail.com

Работа из других городов

ОБЪЯВЛЕНИЯ отсылайте на ed@gay.ru

РЕКЛАМА

Эд Мишин: ed@gay.ru

Адрес обычной почты: 109457, Москва, а/я 1

Figure no.4 shows a screenshot from 22 January 1998 of an advert by a man in Izhevsk looking for a friend 'not just a boy for a day'[6]

[6] Taken using the WayBack Machine, available at, https://web.archive.org/web/19980122124416/http://www.gay.ru/friends/izhevsk.htm, [accessed 15th December 2019].

The above advert was posted the section for the city of Izhevsk and is the only advert to appear for this city at this time. (Using the Wayback Machine it was possible to see that by 1999 four more adverts from Izhevsk had been posted.) At this point, in 1998, queer men had posted personal adverts from 14 cities across the Russian-speaking world which appeared on the *ishchu druga* section of the website. The sections for the cities of Moscow and St Petersburg contained many more personal adverts than the remaining 12 cities, with Izhevsk and Kazan' containing one and Rostov-on-Don two. These numbers perhaps reaffirm that Moscow and St Petersburg had a much more visible queer presence than smaller cities. What further affirms Moscow and St Petersburg's vanguard status is that many of the adverts in smaller cities, such as the one in figure no.4, state that 'it is impossible to find a good friend in this city'. These adverts suggest that Russian queers had begun to see the internet as a useful tool to connect with other queer people in their cities without having to venture out to potentially risky queer bars, or other public queer spaces.

Notably, the adverts that appear in this section and in the numerous cities are just the adverts posted by men. A separate section appears for women and transgender people, however, these are not grouped together by city, instead they appear simply as a list of adverts, of which there are only 11. And in the transgender section, there is an even smaller number of adverts, with just one transgender woman seeking an 'intimate relationship'. The number of woman and transgender people posting adverts on this section of the site suggests that the site is mainly used by queer men rather than queer women and transsexuals, and therefore perhaps only functions as a safe space for queer men.

Despite the opening text of *ishchu druga* dedicating this space to the search for more platonic relationships, this section was visibly used by queer people as a place to meet other queer people for sexual or romantic relationships. Looking at the 25 adverts from three cities

(Ekaterinburg, Kazan' and Izhevsk, rather than the 'vanguard cities' of St Petersburg and Moscow as these cities will have larger, more prominent queer scenes) that appear in this section in October 1999, we can see that fifteen of them use the word *drug [friend* to describe the kind of relationship the user is seeking. As first glance, this might seem as though these adverts are simply seeking a friendship with another user in their area. However, as Anna Wierzbicka noted, the word *drug* indicates a much closer relationship than perhaps the English word friend does: it denotes not simply a bond of friendship with somebody, but someone with whom one shares their life on a daily basis (1997: 60-61). Thus the use of the word *drug* here is important as it shows that the writers of the adverts were seeking a much deeper connection that a passing friendship.

On the current version of gay.ru, the *ishchu druga* section of the website no longer appears. Instead, there are two separate sections that have a similar function: *znakomstvo*, and BBS (Bulletin Board System). The *znakomstvo* section functions mainly as the site's dating portal, where users can find advice on dating and read personal stories relating to queer life. This helps to fulfil the site's aims of providing the 'vitally important information' on queer life and relationships. The *znakmomstvo* section opens with a passage on dating from the site's queer magazine *Kvir* about the experience of meeting people and dating. From this article, we can see that the site is perhaps more orientated towards dating and other romantic experiences rather than connecting Russian queers platonically. In this section, the user can also find a link to the site's dating website *love.gay.ru.* The dating section seems to be widely used, with around 40,000 profiles online at any one time. On the dating portal, the user can create an account and is shown the profiles of other queer people in the nearby area. This also helps queer people from across Russia connect with people in their local area. This is arguably more effective at connecting people from smaller towns across Russia as it uses GPS systems to determine where the user is logging on and therefore will

show other users closer to that user than the former *ishchu druga* section grouping adverts together by the nearest large city. The use of GPS here which allows people interacting with the site to find other queer people closer to them allows users to more easily meet other people. The connections that are then built will then also help to create an offline community in these smaller towns and cities, thus showing how this section can help to build a community.

The BBS section, however, is closer in function to the former *ishchu druga* site as it contains personal ads posted by visitors to the site. The ads are divided by city, with the user able to choose from many different cities across Russia, but again are grouped to the major population areas in the country's various subdivisions. The adverts in these sections are then further divided by topic, for example, looking for work or a flat, or by sexual preferences, such as 'older than 40', 'bears', and 'BDSM'. This section therefore allows the user to search more specifically for potential friends or partners. The absence of a dedicated space to search for friends on the site also hints to a change in focus from connecting the queer community in friendship to finding romantic and sexual partners. From 2005 onwards the link to *ishchu druga* begins to link to love.gay.ru, why this shift occurred, however, is unclear. Perhaps the purpose of the section was changed because the adverts posted on *ishchu druga* began to focus more on sexual relations rather than friendships. This is perhaps part of the wider trend that queer men (who in this section seem to be the ones that post more often) are more likely to seek sex and casual relationships than any other group (Groom and Pennebaker, 2005: 458). As one can see from the screenshot below, this section of the site contains more sexually explicit adverts than seen on the old *ishchu druga* section of the site.

Figure no.5 shows the BBS section of the site in Moscow. Here one can see a change in tone from the ishchu druga section of the site, as these adverts appear more sexual in nature.[7]

[7] Taken from the gay.ru website, available at https://bbsgayru.com/talks/?checkCookie=38916, [accessed 15th December 2019].

2.4 Safety Online

As part of its aims, the site tries to create a safe space for all queer people from across Russia to interact with each other and form a community. Websites such as gay.ru afford the community a certain sense of anonymity. Visitors can explore the website without the need to create a profile and are able to read many articles that can help them to better understand their sexuality and identity. Because of this, gay.ru itself is considered a safe space for the Russian queer community.

However, websites such as gay.ru are not without danger. In fact, this anonymity could be a potential danger in itself. As stated above, users only have to share as much information as they feel comfortable with. For example, many of the adverts in the screenshot above contain very little information and interested parties must make contact themselves in order to find out more about the poster. As argued earlier, this move to an online cruising area has helped to keep the queer community safe by removing the need to go to potential risky public spaces to find romantic or sexual partners. Moscow's famous cruising spots were located in an arc surrounding the Kremlin and Red Square and it was here that Moscow's queer community, although mainly gay men, were able to seek out sexual partners (Healey, 2014: 102). These cruising spots – known amongst Moscow's queer community as the *pleshka* or bald spot – were used from around the 1930s until the late 1990s, when the internet, as Healey notes, largely killed it off (Healey, 2014: 102).

So, the internet and gay.ru facilitated the move from an offline, public space to an online space, where sexual encounters could be arranged without the need to leave one's home. This online space has afforded the Russian queer community with a certain degree of anonymity: to the outside world, they are only required to display as much information as they want. However, there has been much research conducted on the risks, both in terms of violence and sexual health risks,

to the queer community online (see for example, Baumeister et al, 2010). One prominent risk to those seeking out romantic and sexual partners online is ‘catfishing’ - not presenting an accurate representation of oneself online (Miles, 2017: 1604). In Baumeister et al’s (2010: 684) study of risk prevention among men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM), a majority of the participants were concerned for their safety because of this phenomenon of catfishing as well as the risks of trusting a stranger. Despite this perceived risk to their own safety, many of the participants had developed ways to lessen this risk to themselves. Many of the participants said that they only meet potential partners in a public space, chat online for a period before meeting, or exchange contact details such as e-mail address or phone number, so that they can ‘screen’ potential partners before meeting (Baumeister et al., 2010: 687). Participants found that these strategies helped to keep themselves safe from any potentially risky encounters.

In order to mitigate this risk to their own users, gay.ru has provided visitors with a series of tips when meeting people from personal adverts or the internet. Whilst many of the profiles on love.gay.ru have photos of the account holder’s faces, they cannot be sure that that person is in fact who they say they are. This aspect of risk is of particular importance to the Russian queer community, where homophobic attacks have occurred after meeting on queer dating sites and apps (see for example the reports of the anti-gay purges in Chechnya, where queer people were lured on dates then ‘beaten and humiliated’: New York Times, 2017). Because of this threat, the need for security and caution when meeting a potential partner from the internet in Russia is large. This threat could also hinder the creation of a community, whether offline or online, as Russian queers may become more and more reluctant to meet.

Figure no.6 shows the front page to the section on safety warning that queer people often become the victims of 'specific' crimes.[8]

[8] Taken from the gay.ru website, available at, http://www.xgay.ru/society/security/ [accessed 15th December, 2019].

As such gay.ru has taken steps to ensure their users act safely when using dating sites. The site contains a dedicated section entitled *bezopasnost' (*safety). The section's home page asks the users to 'be careful' as 'gays can be victim to 'specific' crimes'. In addition, the site recognises that many queer victims of homophobia in Russia 'do not want to advertise their non-traditional orientation' and as such the site has created a dedicated e-mail address for users to report any homophobic acts they have encountered. Presumably, this also applies to reporting accounts from the dating service that aim to inflict violence upon other users. By making users aware of the dangers posed to them when they use the site to find potential partners, the site is creating a safe environment where users can find sexual partners.

When looking at this section's articles, many of them appear to detail stories about specific homophobic violence that has occurred in the past. The most recent article (from May 2019) to be linked to in that section is an article entitled *"Заставили грудь показать". Трансгендер в полиции Махачкалы' ("They made me show my breasts". A transgender person at the police in Makhachkala).* This article details the abuse faced by an intersex person, when she was arrested by the police in Makhachkala. The aim of this article is to expose state homophobia and violence towards queer and intersex people, as well as warn other queer people of the dangers of being questioned by the police and having one's personal information exposed.

If the user orders the list of articles by 'popularity', the most read article that appears is *как безопасно знакомиться в Интернете (how to date safely on the internet).* The first talks about the dangers of meeting people without personal information on their profile, the second about the dangers of 'maniacs' using queer dating sites to find 'their next victims'. In order to keep their users safe, gay.ru recommends several tips for safe internet-dating in another popular article entitled '*how to defend oneself*'. For example, the article tells the reader to not give out too much

personal information, such as surname or private address. Instead they tell the reader to consider using a special, anonymous e-mail address. These tips are aimed at helping the Russian queer community avoid the potential risks posed by meeting people from the internet. This shows that the site is trying to create a safe space where the queer community in Russia, and the wider Russian-speaking community, can meet each other and find partners without experiencing violence.

2.5 Moving the queer community online

Not only does this section build a community by allowing people to contact other people with similar interests (in a similar way to how the social media sites discussed earlier build a community), it also removes the danger of potentially risky cruising spots. During the Soviet era, Moscow had a thriving cruising scene located around the Kremlin, Red Square, and the Lubyanka building, the home of the KGB (Healey, 2018: 99). Before the Soviet era, however, queer people had their own distinctly queer spaces. Homosexual desire was able to be acted upon in bars, clubs, bath-houses, saunas and private housing. These spaces where same-sex desire was practised were arguable safe spaces, out of the way of state scrutiny. However, as the Soviet Union industrialised the country and people flooded from the villages to the cities, a massive strain was placed upon the housing supply and people began to live in communal apartments. The Soviet government's nationalisation of public spaces and buildings almost meant that the once-safe spaces were taken over. This effectively pushed Soviet queer people out onto the streets in search for an outlet for their same-sex desires. In lieu of their private spaces, homosexuals took advantage of marginal public spaces (Healey, 2002: 361). Many of the places where Soviet homosexuals sought out sexual partners were also the same spaces that heterosexual prostitution took place (Healey, 2002: 362).

Arguably, this online community space is safer than the previous spaces exploited by queer people seeking to express their sexual desires. The internet allows for much more anonymity than public spaces do, meaning that there is a separation between one's queer, online self, and one's 'heterosexual' presenting, offline, self. These sections of the site allow the visitor to seek romantic and sexual partners from the comfort of their own home. This phenomenon of queer spaces moving from the offline to the online is one noted not just in Russia, but across the world. Usher and Morrison (in Pullen and Cooper, 2010) note that 'gays were a natural fit for the Web' and that cyberspace has offered solutions to several problems (2010: 279). Online communities offer opportunities for queer people to find resources about their sexuality and allow queer people to express their sexuality in a forum when they might not have an offline forum to express themselves (Usher and Morrison, 2010: 279).

Nina Wakeford notes there is a 'frequent assertion' that online communities 'are a substitute for participation in gay bars, clubs and other organisations of 'the scene'' (Wakeford, 2002: 128). As seen in Russia, the adoption of the internet changed the way in which queer people interacted with one another (Grov, et al., 2014: 391). This quick adoption led to the abandonment of queer spaces in the late 2000s as the internet became a larger part of people's lives: no more did one need to visit a gay space in order to meet gay people (Grov, et al., 2014: 397). The rise of gay-dating apps and other forms of meeting sexual partners, such as gay.ru, have led to a decreased need to go to queer spaces to find sexual partners. According to one study gay and bisexual men use mobile dating apps more frequently than heterosexuals (Gordon, 2013: as cited in Grov, et al., 2014: 399). This also shows that the shift of the queer space from offline to online is not just a localised phenomenon found in Russia but is a general shift in the way queer people, especially men-who-have-sex-with-men, seek partners. This backs up the 'frequent assertion' that the internet

has seen the decline in offline queer communities, as more and more queer people use online means to meet other queer people.

2.6 Supporting the offline community

As discussed earlier, gay.ru has moved the Russian queer community online. Because of this move to an online queer space many physical queer spaces in Russia have seen a decline, for example, Moscow's *Pleshka*. This supports the opinion the internet has undermined the offline queer community and has caused it to decline.

Despite this, Eleanor Formby's research on online queer communities has shown that online communities often support the development of offline communities (Formby, 2017: 104). Gay.ru could be seen to be contributing to this development of the offline queer community in Russia through content that has appeared on the site on both the past and the present forms of the website. On the early version of the website, gay.ru contained a page called *clubs, theatre and events.* Here the visitor can find details about up-coming events at offline queer spaces in Russia and Ukraine. However, the number of cities for which information was available was, in the beginning, very limited, with information only available on events in Moscow, St Petersburg, Perm', and Kharkov. A year later, there were more than 20 cities with information available on their queer activities with ten of these cities being in former Soviet republics.

Figure no. 7 shows the amount of information available to users when looking at the information for Moscow on the siti-gid. Here the user can find information on HIV services, gay clubs, and other queer spaces.[9]

[9] Taken from the gay.ru website, available at http://region.gay.ru/moscow/, [accessed 15th December 2019].

Figure no.8 shows how the siti-gid appeared in 2000 with its promise to unite Russian gays, lesbians, and bisexuals.[10]

[10] Taken using the WayBack Machine, available at https://web.archive.org/web/20010202030600/http://region.gay.ru/, [accessed 15th December 2019].

Since 2000, this section has evolved into the *siti-gid.* Here the reader can search through a list of cities, find a general history of the city and find out the range of queer activities and spaces that are available in that area. However, the larger the city, the more information available. For example, the page on Moscow contains a large amount of information on clubs, cafés, and other meeting places, as well as information on the range of medical services available. On this page, the visitor can find opening times and addresses for Moscow's various queer clubs and other social spaces. Smaller cities, such as Krasnodar, have a much smaller range of information available but the user is still able to find information on the offline queer community in these cities. In contrast to other sections of the website, the *siti-gid* has appeared mostly in this form since its first appearance on the site in the year 2000. In 2000, the message that appeared on the homepage of the *siti-gid* site declares that its intention is 'to unite Russia's gays, lesbians and bisexuals' to allow them to fulfil their rights as citizens. Notably, the section in 2000 contains a small calendar detailing queer events happening across Russia, such as a gay club opening in Chelyabinsk.

What this section shows is that gay.ru is attempting to support the offline community in Russia by advertising the various queer spaces available in these places. Because of the *siti-gid* section of the site, it can be argued that gay.ru supports the offline queer community. Without gay.ru's advertisements of various queer clubs and spaces in cities across Russia, many of these queer spaces may not have opened or been visited by queer people in those cities. It is because of gay.ru's support of the offline community, especially in smaller cities, that queer activist Igor Iasine said that 'the expansion of the internet has led to the formation of LGBT communities not only in big but even in small cities' (as cited in Buyantueva, 2018: 461). Although Moscow and St Petersburg have more information available, which we can assume means that they have a larger

queer scene, gay.ru has contributed to the development of an offline queer community in these smaller towns and cities by advertising their queer spaces to a wider audience.

Significantly, gay.ru also supports the queer communities of other post-Soviet republics. Visitors to the *siti-gid,* as with the earlier clubs and events page, are able to find information relating events and queer spaces in cities in Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Belarus, and even Turkmenistan (where homosexuality is still a criminal offence). This shows that gay.ru even tries to support the offline queer community and offline queer spaces across the former Soviet Union and has not concentrated its efforts on just Russia itself. Therefore gay.ru can be said to be supporting a Russian-speaking queer community that extends across the former Soviet Union.

2.7 Blue Wave

Another section of the site that is dedicated to building a community is the site's literary section. In this section of the site the visitor can find various content related to different forms of literature. One can find articles relating to histories of various literary figures or to queer works. Particularly rich is the *vashe tvorchestvo [your creations]* page, where the site links to various literary creations by users of the site presented in editions of the site's magazine *Golubaia Volna* or (*light*) *Blue Wave.* The name of this magazine is significant as the masculine form of the adjective 'light blue', *goluboi*, is used colloquially as a term for a gay man (Baer, 2015: 181). This use of the *goluboi* is perhaps a way of reclaiming the word and repurposing it from something negative into a positive symbol of the queer community the site is trying to build.

Many of the issues of *golubaia volna* are available for the visitor to view and read. Often the works are in the form of short story or of a poem. The works vary in subject but nearly all detail some form of queer love. Some works tell the story of an encounter between two (usually young) men or deal with homophobia and feelings surrounding exploring one's own sexuality. Notably there is no female-orientated literature and all the stories and poems seem to be about men, despite the magazine being labelled as a collection of works by 'gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender' authors. The male dominance of this section further highlights that gay.ru is perhaps more of a safe space for queer men than for queer Russians as a whole, showing perhaps that in this section the site does not achieve its goal of providing a safe space for everyone.

This collection of queer literature is important to the building of a Russian queer community as the act of reading queer literature helps to form a queer imagined community. Anderson argues that the act of reading creates an imagined community, as a community of people are reading the same thing at a similar time (1991: 36). In addition, queer literature is extremely important to the concept of queer identity. As Cart and Jenkins argue, in the

[…] quintessential literature of the outsider […] there is a need to see one's face reflected in the pages of a book and thus to find the corollary comfort that derives from the knowledge that one is not alone in a vast universe, that there are others "like me". (Cart and Jenkins, 2006: 1).

In a place like Russia where queer literature does not have any other means of being exchanged and reaching a wider audience, this literary magazine is a valuable source of comfort as well as information or the queer community in Russia. As Cart and Jenkins said, the readers of these works can take comfort in knowing that there are other people in the Russian-speaking world, who have the same feelings and experiences as they do.

2.8 Is gay.ru for the queer community as a whole?

Throughout this work, I have been referring to gay.ru as a safe space for the whole Russian queer community: whether that be gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, or any other sexual and gender identity. However, as we have seen when examining the various sub-sections the website does seem to have a very strong male focus, despite the website's tagline of being the 'Russian server of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people'. The imagery on the site also reflects this male dominance, as on various sections of the website, there are pictures of (mostly white) young, gay men and flashy adverts at the top of the screen and down the side of the web-page are targeted towards a male audience.

Figure no. 9 is a screenshot of the site's page current page on family. Here the user can see young, white males in every photo.[11]

[11] Taken from the gay.ru website, available at http://www.xgay.ru/society/family/, [accessed 15th December 2019].

Figure no.9 shows a screenshot of the homepage of the section entitled *family*. Here, one can easily see the male focus of the section, demonstrated by the photograph of two men. The adverts at the top and the right-hand side of the page are both orientated to a male demographic: both being adverts for male underwear. Even the entries in *golubaia volna* seem to be orientated towards a queer male audience with many of the stories and poems telling of encounters between young men. This seems to reflect the assertion that the wider queer community itself along with representations of queer people in the media is dominated by narratives of white, gay men (Avila-Saavedra, 2009: 18). In the United States, for example, the stereotype of the average gay man is 'white and well-to-do' (Berube, 2001: 234). And, as mentioned earlier, it is now not uncommon to see photos of white queers advertising the trendiest queer spaces in places such as the Philippines or Japan (Altman, 1996: 77).

The dominance of men in the wider queer community would explain why the site's narratives are dominated by stories of male-male love. The fact that white men are also seen to be the dominant image in the wider queer community also reflects the lack of racial diversity in the site's images. For example, in figure no.9 every male pictured is white, which perhaps shows that the site sees its target audience as white males, despite the site's reach extending to Central Asia. If the site truly wishes to represent the whole queer community across the former Soviet Union, then surely the site would have more images of people from ethnic minorities. This lack of diversity in the site's imagery and portrayal of queer relationships could mean that gay.ru is targeted at one subsection of the Russian queer community, rather than the whole community.

Despite this male dominance, the site does contain information aimed at queer women and transgender people. In fact, gay.ru operates a 'sister' site called lesbi.ru. This site seems to tackle issues for Russia's queer female community and operates in a very similar way to gay.ru. The site

is divided up into sections (though not as many as gay.ru) and links to articles of a queer female interest. Notably, however, most of the articles that are linked to on lesbi.ru link back to gay.ru. Even lesbi.ru's BBS section links back to gay.ru and the adverts posted there, with the lesbi.ru specific sections appearing empty. This separation of gay.ru and lesbi.ru perhaps hints to gay.ru primary users being queer men and that the site's leadership felt the need to the create a secondary site focused on queer women. However, the lack of content and, indeed, adverts on the BBS section also suggests that lesbi.ru and gay.ru are not widely used by the queer female community in Russia.

Does this therefore mean that gay.ru does not qualify as a safe space for the queer community as a whole and is instead a safe space for only the queer male community in Russia? This could be argued as the case as gay.ru contains content and information that is predominantly aimed at queer men, as demonstrated earlier in this section. However, whilst figure no.9 demonstrates a male-dominated narrative when dealing with issues of the family, the site is inclusive in its language. For example, the *family* section says 'heterosexuals find it hard to imagine a family consisting of two men or *two women*' (emphasis my own). Other articles on the homepages of the various sub-sections of gay.ru, however, tend to use gender neutral language when giving an introduction to the topics. The use of gender neutral and inclusive language does therefore suggest that gay.ru is in fact attempting to be inclusive of all genders and sexual identities and is not just aimed solely at queer men.

However, the idea that gay.ru is focused purely on queer men is further backed up by the graphics and pictures used on lesbi.ru. Where pictures of young males would appear on gay.ru, young women appear alongside the articles on lesbi.ru. Comparing the section on *family* on both websites, the first difference is the absence of a picture showing a queer female family. In addition, the introduction to the section on lesbi.ru contains the same introduction as on gay.ru's page, but

in a much shorter version, omitting a short discussion of what a 'gay family' is and the part about 'heterosexuals finding it hard to imagine a family consisting of two men or two women'. Arguably, therefore, one can consider that lesbi.ru fills in the gap that is created by gay.ru's queer male focus. While gay.ru attempts to form a safe space for all queer Russian speakers, I argue that gay.ru does not quite do enough to be a safe space for all members of the Russian queer community. The site, while containing information and content that is aimed at the community as a whole, is often too focused on queer, white males in its imagery, which could make some members of the community feel that the site is not for them.

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how gay.ru seeks to develop a community in Russia, both online and offline. Various sections of the site are dedicated to making connections. Gay.ru's first personal adverts section, *ishchu druga*, allowed queer people from across Russia to post adverts, allowing them to develop new relationships in the online realm and offline. These adverts were grouped on the site by city, giving users the chance to find people like them in their, or the nearest, city. These connections could then potentially develop into offline relationships and thus contribute to the creation of an offline community in cities where a queer community had perhaps never existed before. Today's gay.ru contains a mixture of these personal adverts, known now as the BBS section, and an online dating site. The dating site uses GPS systems to locate its users, which means that users are able to find users closer to them than if they were responding to an advert from their nearest big city.

Another part of the site that is used to support the queer community's activities is the *siti-gid*. This section of the site contains information on a particular city's queer venues, queer bars,

and other queer events. This information is vital for the offline community as it gives queer people an idea of real, physical spaces to go in order to express their sexuality. However, this section of the site is let down by the lack of up-to-date information for cities outside of Moscow and St Petersburg. The site also contains a collection of literature written by its users in its *Golubaya Volna* section. Here, users can submit their own short-stories, poems and other narratives and many of the submissions focus on same-sex love. This collection of literature is also vital for the creation of a community as it allows its readers to see that there are others out there in Russia who feel the same way and are experiencing the same difficulties.

Whilst the site does build and support the Russian queer community, it is dominated by images and narratives of queer men. The site is covered in adverts and images which mostly consist of young, white men. Although the site does make some attempt to be inclusive in its language, the site is predominantly used by queer men, as seen with the lack of personal adverts from women or transgender people. The dominance of white queer men on the site could be off-putting to some users who do not identify as white or male and therefore means that the site does not function entirely as a safe space for the whole Russian queer community.

Chapter 3 - Gay.ru and the global gay

Gay.ru is not only an information portal for the Russian queer community, and a means of building community cohesion: it also functions as a news portal. When a visitor accesses the site's homepage, they are met with articles on queer-themed events and news from around Russia, the former Soviet Union and the world. For example, on the front page of gay.ru on the 7th July 2019, there was an article discussing the various gay pride parades that had taken place a day earlier in many cities across Europe. By placing the Russian queer community within the global queer community in this way, I argue that gay.ru has become transnationalised. Ulf Hannerz argues that transnational is a term that defines 'phenomena, which can be of quite variable scale and distribution, even when they do share the characteristic of not being contained within a state.' (1996:6). Transnational also emphasises that 'the actors may […] be individuals, groups, movements, business enterprises' (Hannerz, 1996:6).

This transnationalism is also contained in many of its articles on everyday queer life and not just their news articles focusing on queer news from abroad. These articles focus on the intersections of the Russian and global queer community and experience. One such article, for example, focuses on how to leave Russia and gain asylum in America. In this article a Russian lawyer details the documents needed and the process to gain political asylum because of one's sexuality.[12] Whilst at first it is perhaps striking to see gay.ru making information on emigration readily available to its queer community, it is a sign of the general feeling within the community. In a similar article entitled *druz'ia uezzhaite! [friends, leave!],* a poll appears which asks the

[12] http://www.xgay.ru/society/legislation/law/america/kargalcev.html [accessed 15th December 2019].

readership to answer the question '*would you like to leave Russia?'* The answer with the most responses (71.6%) is '*Yes, I constantly think about it.'*

Gay.ru's content points to the site being an actor in the transnationalisation of the Russian queer community as the site seeks to constantly create links between the Russian queer community and global queer communities. However, many things about the site, such as its advertising, its background, and its terminology, have a more Western look. Therefore, I argue that gay.ru has been influenced by the globalisation of sexualities and indeed acts as an agent for the globalisation of the Russian queer community.

3.1 What is the globalisation of sexualities?

According to Jon Binnie, sexualities have become globalised by the 'processes associated with the movement of people, capital and goods across national borders' (Binnie, 2007: abstract). He suggests that people across the world are becoming more aware of different sexualities, gender identities and other issues relating to sex through the increased connectedness of the world. Scholarship over the past two decades has shown that the queer community has been affected by this globalisation and that queer organisations and communities are now more connected than ever (Altman, 1996, 2002). Dennis Altman noted the appearance of the "global gay" derived mainly from American youth culture (1996: 77). Altman also notes that these images have cropped up all over the world, from South America to South East Asia and that the models featured in these images make references to 'luxurious' queer spaces like the ones found in Western cities like Paris or Los Angeles (1996: 77-78). Peter A. Jackson points out that 'images of queer sexuality circulate across the globe' (Jackson, 2009: 357). Due to the 'identifiable common elements' found among the different gender and sexual identities found across the world (Drucker as cited in Jackson,

2009: 357), Altman identifies that the 'global queering' phenomenon is the result of American hegemony (as cited by Jackson, 2009: 358). Furthermore, Ken Plummer (1992: 17) noted that 'homosexualities have become globalized' and that a Western-style queer lifestyle has spread across the world. Based on this scholarship, one can argue that the globalisation of sexuality is made up of the spread of Western-style sexual ideals and values. Gay.ru, I argue, fits in with this narrative of a Western-style queer culture spreading from the West to the East as the site has become a conduit through which sexualities in Russia have become globalised and more Western looking.

Altman believes that the 'evidence of this new gay world' is in the number of commercial establishments that have appeared across South and Central America, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe (1996: 78). He refers to a number of cities in these areas where, in 1994, a multitude of commercial establishments now form a queer space, such as bars and discos in cities such as, Bogotá, Istanbul and Manila (Altman, 1996: 78). This 'crude counting' helps to emphasise the effect of Western-style consumerism on the development of a queer community across the world (Altman, 1996: 78). For Altman, the growth in the number of commercial queer spaces, rather than 'traditional bathhouses' for example, as well as the increased co-operation between queer activists in these countries, points to an adoption of a Western-style queer culture (Altman, 1996: 78).

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, and for a short time afterwards, Russian queer (male) subcultures were concentrated on 'semi-private intellectual salons', public spaces such as those around the Red Square and Kremlin complex, and bathhouses (Healey, 2002: 359). These, however, fell out of use by the late 1990s due to the adoption of the internet for cruising purposes

and the availability of bars and discos where one could meet other queer people (Healey, 2018: 99). With the expansion of the internet, and the beginning of the globalisation of Russian queer culture, Russia's queer subculture moved into more commercialised spaces, especially in Russia's larger cities, suggesting that these cities too have adopted more Western-style, commercial, queer spaces. For example, gay.ru advertises queer clubs in Moscow with slick looking websites, which advertise a variety of shows and queer events, such as drag events, on offer.

A recent article focuses on the re-opening of one of Moscow's biggest queer clubs, *The Three Monkeys,* which before its closure in 2012 was visited by Jean-Paul Gaultier, Alexander McQueen, Marc Almond, and Boy George. Notably, these names are all associated with the Western queer community and the article does not list any famous Russian queer people associated with the club. This use of recognisable Western queer icons suggests that the best queer clubs are those associated with Western names and the Western queer community. This supports Altman's assertion that a Western-style queer culture has been adopted by many countries outside of Western Europe and North America. On the other hand, the increased numbers of commercial queer spaces also suggest that Russian queers are taking advantage of the fact that homosexuality is no longer criminalised and therefore can occupy a visible space.

Scott Long argues that one of the factors behind the growth in visibility and international co-operation in the realm of queer rights is the spread of democratic regimes and increased weight placed on social and human rights (Long, 2005: 3). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's political leaders were finally subjected to a 'trial by ballot box' (Lovell, 2006: 40). Thus, Russia was on its way to becoming an 'effective democracy' (Lovell, 2006: 40). Kees Waaldijk agrees with Long in that he equates the legalisation of homosexual acts with the expansion of human

rights, calling homosexuality an '*international human rights issue'* (emphasis as in original, Waaldijk, 2000: 72). For Waaldijk, Russia's decriminalisation of homosexual acts was part of the 'rush to meet the human rights criteria that were set for membership of the Council of Europe' (Waaldijk, 200: 72).

What this scholarship suggests is that the legalisation of homosexual and queer acts marks the beginning of a state's road to becoming a Western-style democracy, where the civil and human rights of all groups are recognised and protected. However, some scholars look at this globalisation of sexual cultures as the product of Western "cultural imperialism" and Altman notes that imposing Western ideas of sexuality threatens our understanding of the native queer practices across the world (Altman, 1996: 81). Much of the scholarship focuses on how Western ideas of sexuality and queerness have come to dominate across the world and how Western activists have fought to have the rights of their queer friends in "less socially progressive" countries recognised. This "cultural imperialism" is something noted by American scholar, Laurie Essig, in her 1999 work, *Queer in Russia*. In this work, Essig attempts to examine public expressions of queerness in post-Soviet Russia and how Russian queers struggled with Western attempts to organise queer activism in Russia in the 1990s.

During *perestroika* and *glasnost'* and the newfound freedom that came with these policies, the Soviet queer community was exposed to new ideas of sexuality and queerness. With the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union and the legalisation of homosexuality, Western queer activists came to Russia to try and organise a gay and lesbian movement after a Western model. Essig describes many of the activists that went to Russia as 'colonizing' (1999: 139) and as purely international affairs that had no Russian basis (1999: 141). Essig is critical of the Western activists'

attempts to bring sexual freedom to Russia and believes that the Russian ideas of queerness and sexuality are 'too fuzzy' to be assigned broad terms like those that the Western activists were trying to bring to Russia (Essig, 1999: x). However, as Brian J. Baer (2002) notes, many of the queer organisations that sprung up in the 1990s relied heavily on Western support (503), which suggests that Russians were keen to accept help in organising a Western style queer movement in Russia.

Queer activists, it seems, were the only ones to really accept this support, as Baer points out that many of the queer organisations had very few members (Baer, 2002: 503). This supports Essig's notion that Russian queers were happy to be left alone and did not need Western help to live a queer life-style. Baer also suggests that this reluctance to accept Western sexual cultures is because of 'homosexuality' not being seen as 'a distinct and visible category' (2002: 504). Baer's observations suggest that Essig's ideas of a division between Western activists and Russian activists are not as clear cut as she put forward. Gay.ru also suggests that this division is not as clear cut as Essig suggests. Although gay.ru is a website founded and run by local Russian queer activists, it is heavily influenced by the West and ideas of a Western queer culture.

3.2 Gay.ru and 'global gay' advertising

The Western influence on gay.ru is firstly seen when looking at the site's history. Mishin took the idea for the original message board from an American message board for queer men he encountered when in the US. He then created a message board on the Russian FIDO network, which eventually evolved into the site we see today. Due to Mishin's American influences in creating the site, it could also be argued that the site has been the driving force behind the globalisation of Russia's queer community. By evolving in the way that it has to become a slick,

modern site with adverts that mimic queer advertising found in the West, the site has helped to expose the Russian queer community to Western sexual cultures and values. With the images, adverts, and the articles on the site, Mishin could be seen as promoting a queer lifestyle that is based on a Western idea of sexuality and therefore trying to create a Western-style queer culture.

Another way in which one can see a Western influence on gay.ru is through the use of advertising. As stated earlier, the scholarship on the queer movement's globalisation suggests that one of the side-effects of globalisation is the commercialisation of queer spaces. Rather than having the traditional queer spaces, such as bathhouses and outdoor cruising areas, queer people can now visit a 'luxurious' nightclub, sauna, disco, café or other commercial establishment. In this way, queer advertising becomes more prominent, as Altman discussed (1996, 77). From looking at modern gay.ru, one can see that the site hosts many adverts for different brands and items. In contrast, the earlier versions of gay.ru show that the site did not focus as heavily on such forms of advertising.

Figure no.10 is a screenshot of the lifestyle section and gives an example of the type of advertising now common on gay.ru.[13]

[13] Taken from the gay.ru website, available at, http://www.xgay.ru/style/ [accessed 15th December 2019].

Figure no.10 shows the main page of the 'lifestyle' section of the site and shows an example of the type of advertising featured on gay.ru. As can be seen the adverts are mainly focused at men - showing the queer male dominance of the site, as discussed in chapter one - featuring muscular men, which are designed to attract the eye of the queer male viewer. A study of American magazines in 2008 showed that the majority of the adverts featured in these magazines featured young, shirtless muscular men (see Table 2, Saucier & Caron, 2008: 513). Using the same categories as Saucier and Caron of *youthful appearance, shirtless, hairless, muscular,* and *Caucasian*, similar results are found on gay.ru. When examining the main pages of 5 of gay.ru's subsections 10 out of the 12 adverts feature young, shirtless men, and 8 out of the 12 have little or no body hair, and 9 out of the 12 featured white men. This suggests that gay.ru has been affected by American advertising norms as a side-effect of the globalisation of the Russian queer community.

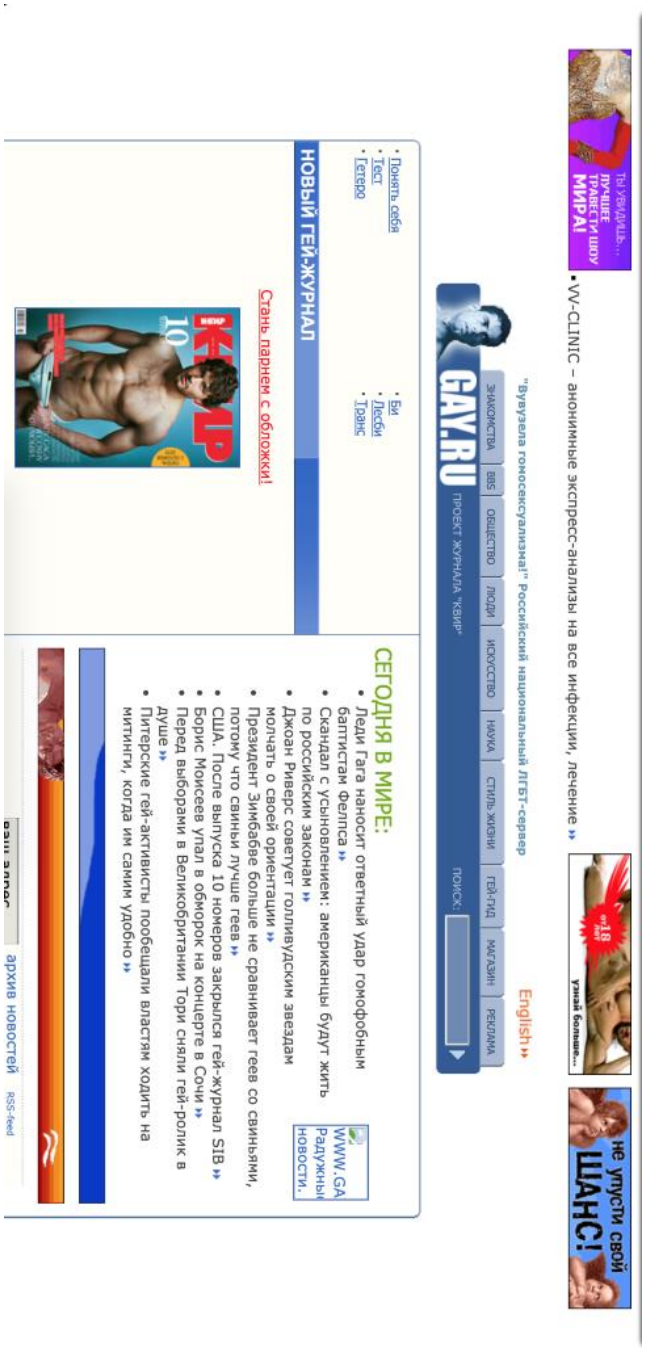

Figure no. 11 shows the site in July 2010, showing that the website was not always dominated by large glossy adverts containing half-naked men.[14]

[14] Taken using the WayBack Machine, available at, https://web.archive.org/web/20100722002137/http://www.gay.ru/ [accessed 15th December 2019].

At this point, it makes sense to look back at the earlier versions of the site to see how the site's advertising has changed over time. Figure no.10 shows the site's homepage in July 2010. Here, the difference in advertising strategy is very noticeable. Rather than having large, flashing adverts at the top of the page, the advertising on the page tends to be subtler. However, this figure also shows an advert for gay.ru's magazine *Kvir*. The front cover of this magazine presents the image of a shirtless, muscular, white man, with the caption '*become the guy from the cover!'.* As Saucier and Caron concluded, the adverts in the American magazines represent the idea of the idealised queer man: young, muscular, hairless, and Caucasian (Saucier & Caron, 2008: 522). The fact that gay.ru offers images of men that match Saucier and Caron's descriptions of the American ideal show that the ideal Russian queer man has become identical to the idealised American queer man.

Figure no. 12 shows the site in 1998 and how little advertising appeared on the site back then. [15]

[15] Taken using the WayBack Machine, available at https://web.archive.org/web/19980614080122/http://www.gay.ru/ [accessed 15th December 2019].

Figure no.12 shows the site in July 1998. Even more noticeably, the site almost completely lacks advertising, with just one discreet advert at the top of the page for an American gay porn website. By looking at the evolution of the site's advertising, it can be assumed that gay.ru and the Russian queer community have become more globalised and commercialised over the decades that gay.ru has been active. Furthermore, the site has a dedicated online shop, which sells clothes, underwear, and miscellaneous sex toys. Arguably, this is also another sign of the globalisation and commercialisation of gay.ru and the Russian queer community, as these products fit the stereotypes of queer people, especially queer American men, as fashion-conscious (Reilly, Rudd & Hillery, 2008: 323). This suggests that gay.ru believes that the ideal queer person is someone based upon an American/Western idea of sexuality and queerness, which is further evidence as to the globalisation of gay.ru.

The difficulties in applying Western notions of sexuality on non-Western countries, in this case Russia, is something noted by other scholars of the globalisation of queer identities. For example, Peter A. Jackson notes that many Asian queers use Western terms of sexuality to 'reject local heteronormative strictures*'* but this does not constitute a 'wholesale recreation of Western sexual cultures in Asian contexts' (Jackson, 2001:6). Other research suggests that the globalisation of Western queer identities has an almost colonising effect and that 'Western bias within queer scholarship and activism is a violence directed against queer cultures across the globe' (Oswin, 2006: 787). What this scholarship, combined with Essig's findings, suggests is that Russia's indigenous notions of sexuality and queerness reject or are inherently incompatible with Western ideas of queerness as a category: either as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transsexual. Essig sees many Russians' queerness as fluid and that many queer Russians lead open "heterosexual" lifestyles and lead "closeted" queer lifestyles where they act upon their same-sex desires (Essig, 1999: 57).

Essig's work, however, has often been criticised by other scholars for its reliance on the studies of a 'marginal figure' in the Russian medical community (Baer, 2002: 510). Baer also criticises her for her heavy reliance on 'radical' activists, Evgeniia Debrianskaia and Yaroslav Mogutin, as well as the fact that she's presented Russia as "sexually radical" (2002: 510).

3.3 The Russian server of light blue and pink

This study of the evolution of gay.ru and how globalised it has become over the years sheds new light on our understanding of the ways in which gay culture has changed in Russia. Essig's work, conducted during the 1990s, shows that Russian queer activists were struggling with the new concepts of activism brought to them by Western activists. Her work shows that there was some resistance to this 'cultural imperialism' and 'colonisation' of the Russian queer community. Since her fieldwork, I argue, the queer community in Russia has become more globalised, as evidenced by the changes in gay.ru, and the queer community has begun to accept Western ideas of what a queer community and culture looks like.

Ever since the site first went online, one can see that the site has always had a vaguely international outlook, reporting on queer news and events that might be of interest to the Russian readership. Today's site homepage contains links to articles written about events all over the world, such as articles on the annual Eurovision Song Contest and Tbilisi's first gay pride parade, which suggest that the Russian queer community has become more interested in queer events on a global scale, rather than simply those in Russia. Essig tried to avoid using words such as "gay" and "lesbian" in her work, because she felt these words did not accurately portray the way in which queer Russians define their sexuality (Essig, 1999: x). Despite this, one sees that gay.ru has adopted these words as labels to define their visitors. As mentioned earlier, the site describes itself

as the ‘Russian server for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people’, suggesting that the site’s administrators, and indeed readership, have begun to define themselves using this terminology. This also suggests that the way in which queer Russians define themselves has been affected by the globalisation of the global queer movement and that gay.ru has perhaps been a driving force behind this change in vocabulary. Traditional Russian terminology for queer identities were originally Russian words: *goluboi,* literally light blue, which is term for men who desire other men, and *rozovaia,* literally pink, applied to women who desire women (Essig, 1999: x). If gay.ru had not been affected by the globalisation of the queer movement, it might have labelled itself as “*rossiiski server golubykh i rozovykh”* (the Russian server of gay men and lesbians).

The use of Western words in place of localised terms for queer identities contradicts Jackson’s notion that local queer movements outside of the Western context are merely using the Western terminology in order to reject local customs and are not ‘recreating Western sexual cultures’ in their own local contexts. This phenomenon of traditional queer terms in Russian being replaced by Westernised terms is something noted by Brian Baer in his study of Russian queer magazines (2015). Baer notes that in the Soviet Union, the government maintained a silence around the topic of sex, not just in literary circles, but also in academic circles (2015: 174). He therefore suggests that after the collapse of the Union, when sex became a topic of discussion, Russians needed to adopt Westernised words in order to adequately discuss sexology and queer identity (Baer, 2015: 175). In his study, Baer looks at two queer magazines, *Ty* from 1993 and *Kvir* from 2011. These years are significant as 1993 is the year of homosexuality’s decriminalisation in Russia and 2011 was the year before a wave of anti-homosexual propaganda laws began to appear across Russia (Baer, 2015: 179). His results show that the traditional Russian terms such as *goluboi*

are now less frequently used than *gei* (Baer, 2015: 179). In *Kvir*, *gei* was used 116 times, whereas in *Ty* it was used only 40 times (Baer, 2015: 179). Baer also notes that the legal and medical terms such as *gomoseksualist, gomoseksual'nyi* and *gomoseksualnost'* combined appear much less frequently in *Kvir* than in *Ty* (99 times in *Ty* and only 16 times in *Kvir*) (Baer, 2015: 179).

One sees a similar trend by examining the pages of gay.ru. On the current version of the site, one sees more references to *gei,* and *lesbiianki* than *goluboi and rozavaia.* In order to count how many times a certain term or word has been used on the site, I used the search bar to find all mentions of the word on the site. According to the results (as shown in Table 1) 'Westernised terms' such as a *gei* and *lesbiianka* appear more often on the site than the traditional Russian terms *goluboi* and *rozovaia*. The more frequent use of Westernised terms suggest that the Russian queer community has become globalised and affected by the increased visibility of a Western-style queer culture. However, in contrast to Baer's findings the 'medical and legal' terms such as *gomoseksual'nyi, gomoseksualist* and *gomosekusal'nost'* appear much more frequently on gay.ru than Baer's finding would suggest. This is perhaps due to many of gay.ru's articles being from a more scientific or journalistic point of view therefore necessitating a more legal or medical term than *gei*. *Goluboi* also appears more often than one would expect when looking at Baer's findings and analysis, however, it is important to note that the site's search engine will also find uses of *goluboi* when used in the context of 'light blue'.

It is also interesting to note the use of English language terms that have been transliterated rather than translated into Russian. One notable example is the use of the phrase *kaming-aut* [coming-out], a literal transliteration of the English-term. This use of an English-language phrase transliterated into Russian, which Baer notes has 'encroached' on the Russian phrase *vyiti iz*

podpol'ia [coming out from underground]. Whilst my search found that *vyiti iz podpol'ia* appears more often than *kaming-aut,* it should be noted that the search for *vyiti iz podpol'ia* also found any variation of the phrase *vyiti iz*, whether that be *iz podpol'ia* or *iz shkafa* [from underground or the closet].

The use of these Westernised terms over traditional Russian terms strongly suggests that the site and therefore the Russian queer community has been heavily influenced by Western notions of queer identity. If the site were trying to keep Russian queer identity distinctly Russian, they would surely be more inclined to use the more traditional Russian terms. One could also argue that gay.ru's use of Western terms for sexual identities is their attempt to 'recreate' Western sexual cultures in the Russian context. It could also, however, point to the editors of the website trying to create their own narrative and identity for the Russian queer community, rather than reflecting the community as a whole, with the editors acting as agents of globalisation. The use of the words "gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender" also suggests that gay.ru is trying to position the Russian queer movement within the international queer movement by using more internationally recognised words and terminology, thus further showing gay.ru's transnationalism.

Term searched for	Number of hits on the site according to Yandex search
Гомосексуальный	9659
Гей	More than 73,000
Гомосекуальность	More than 17,000
Лесбиянка	More than 20,000
Голубой	More than 12,000
Розовая	4721
Натурал	8215
Гетеросексуал	5451
Каминг-аут	More than 10,000
Выйти из подполья / шкафа	More than 66,000

Table 1 shows the terms searched for on Gay.ru's internal search and the number of times the term was found on the website.

3.4 Stonewall as a watershed for Russian queers?

What further contributes to the idea that gay.ru has a globalised idea of sexuality and the queer rights movement is its use of an American event as the beginning of the queer rights movement. Gay.ru's page on the *gei-dvizhenie (the gay movement)* recounts the story of the Stonewall Inn Riots after a police raid on the gay club in June 1969, which is widely considered the beginning of the queer rights movement (Altman, 1996). The site has translated this short excerpt from a book entitled *The Gay 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Gay Men and Lesbians, Past and Present,* using a book originally in English and an American event to create a page marking the beginning of the gay liberation movement. In their translation, gay.ru call the event the 'beginning of the gay liberation movement'. For gay.ru this is the most important event in queer history as it marks the beginning of queer visibility and the fight for queer rights.

The appropriation of a Western event is also interesting as Russian queers enjoyed relative freedom during the Bolshevik legalisation of homosexuality nearly 50 years earlier. Gay.ru could also have claimed the Yeltsin decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993 as their own Stonewall.

Instead they chose to focus on an American event as the key moment in queer history as this was arguably the beginning of a new era in queer politics. Indeed, as gay.ru notes, many of the gay pride events held in 2019 were dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Inn riots. This use of Stonewall as the watershed moment in queer history points further to the globalised nature of gay.ru and the Russian queer community. Gay.ru is seeking to connect the Russian queer community to the global queer world by making the same connections to global queer history as other local queer groups do.

3.5 Internationalisation of sexual regulation in Russia

It could also be argued that the Russian state's regulation of sexuality is also governed by the growing visibility of queer culture across the world. As mentioned previously, even the first laws against sodomy in the Imperial Army under Peter the Great in the 17th Century were influenced by Western ideas, specifically by the Swedish model of army discipline (Persson, 2015: 257). This was later reversed by the Bolsheviks to modernise Russia's legal code, but the ban on sodomy was later reintroduced by Stalin (Persson, 2015: 257). Stalin's reintroduction of a ban on male homosexual acts was partly inspired by anti-Western ideas, as Stalin feared that networks of male homosexuals would function as fascist spy rings (Healey, 2017: 157). After the fall of communism homosexuality was re-legalised so that Russia could be accepted into the Council of Europe (Persson, 2015: 257). Russia's history of the regulation of homosexuality shows that whether the new laws be progressive or reactionary and repressive, they have nearly always been influenced by international factors.

This outside influence can also be seen in Russian queer literature, which has a history of so-called 'transnational encounters' which can be traced back to the very first queer

story, *Wings* (1912) by Mikhail Kuzmin (Doak, 2019, (forthcoming)). Kuzmin's novella tells the story of a young Russian boy, Vanya, whose journey of self-discovery is aided by his half-English tutor, Larion. In the story, Larion teaches Vanya to read the Ancient Greek classics in the original and it is through this that the young Russian discovers and comes to terms with his sexuality (Doak, 2019). Later queer-themed works, such as Tokareva's 'The Violet Suit' (1999), also express this 'coming-out' through a transnational encounter, but they become more critical of the West and show that Western ideals of homosexuality do not necessarily fit the typical Russian view of sexuality (Doak, 2019). The difference between these transnational encounters is explained by the eras in which they are written. Kuzmin's *'Wings'* was written in Imperial Russia, whereas Tokareva's 'The Violet Suit' takes place in a time when Russia was struggling to define itself as part of a new world led by the West.

Some of gay.ru's articles, however, offer a counter-narrative to the idea that Western ideas of homosexuality differ from Russian ideas of sexuality presented in modern, Russian queer-themed works and are more positive about the West and their ideas surrounding homosexuality. One such article is a piece entitled *My Gay History*. Written by Sasha Korbut, the first part of the article reflects on his own experiences of growing up as a queer man in Vladivostok and the differences (or rather lack of) between the queer experience in modern Russia and the Soviet Union. The second, however, focuses on Korbut's experience of moving to the US and how the queer experience differs to his experience growing up. In the second article, Korbut how he 'felt free – from prejudice, from hate and judgement.' He also discusses how it was considered 'normal' to walk down the streets holding hands with his boyfriend. He compares these experiences to the bullying he received at school and the feeling of danger when meeting with other queer people in his hometown. This contrast between attitudes in Russia and America presents the idea that it is

easier, and better, to be queer in the West. Within the context of globalised sexual cultures, this article is perhaps also suggesting that for Russian queers to become accepted, Russia needs to begin to adopt Western-style ideas of sexuality. In the first part of the article, when focusing on the Soviet persecution and oppression of queer people, the author suggests that Western queer people have access to more information that Soviet queers. It is for this reason the author believes that Western queers are freer and more accepted than their Soviet counterparts. Arguably, the author is suggesting that a Western-style openness towards sexual identity is needed to change attitudes towards queerness in the Soviet Union.

The encounters, in which a Russian is exposed to their homosexual desires by an intriguing foreigner, help to show the transnationality of the queer community. Kuzmin, as Doak notes, seems to suggest that sexuality is something that comes above nationality (Doak, 2019). It is as though belonging to the queer community is a form of nationality that does not depend on one's place of birth. This is something that is reflected in queer rights organisations across the world which have been cooperating more and more over the last few decades and lobbying governments for equal rights (Kollman and Waites, 2009: 2). This had led to the rise of organisations such as the International Gay and Lesbian Association (Kollman and Waites, 2009: 4). Gay.ru forms part of this international effort to secure equal rights, not just for the Russian queer community, but also for the global queer community. Gay.ru is part of the 'GBLT Center – Together' (also known in Russian as: *Просветительский центр "Я+Я"),* which has full membership of IGLA-Europe (International Gay and Lesbian Association – Europe). IGLA - Europe works with both international groups and local groups to advocate for equality across Europe. This places gay.ru firmly in the (international) battle for improved rights for queer people in Russia.

Although today there is intense international pressure on Russia to soften its stance on homosexuality, the state has so far refused to be moved on the issue. The 'Western' influence here is often seen as 'cultural imperialism' by Russians and many queer activists are thought of as Western agents (Wilkinson, 2014: 365). This is part of the wider opinion about the differences between Russia and Europe/the West. Originally this was a debate between Westernisers and Slavophiles in the 19th Century, which then turned into a debate between Communism and Capitalism in the 20th Century (Moss, 2015). This debate has now turned into a debate between 'gay-loving Europe' and 'traditional Russia' (Moss, 2015). As part of this debate, Russia defines itself as a 'distinct civilisation' that cannot be seen as either Western or Eastern: Russia is just Russia (Moss, 2015). And by creating this image of Europe as filled with homosexuality, paedophilia, and zoophilia, Russia is seeking to distance itself from the 'moral' ills that fill Europe and keep the 'traditional society' that Russia has built intact.

By turning the debate on sexuality into a debate between East/West, the government is making more problems for itself where the fight for Russian queer rights is concerned. International organisations are perhaps more likely to come to their Russian counterparts' aid, thus exposing the community to more Western ideas of sexual culture and ideals. This further globalises gay.ru and the Russian queer community as Western organisations will help them to organise themselves, their protests, and their goals along Western lines. Gay.ru is challenging its government's narrative that being queer, or even part of a globalised society, is detrimental to Russia and its values, through its active reporting on foreign queer news and events. In this way, gay.ru is anchoring the Russian queer community firmly within the international queer community. This, as argued earlier, helps to form Anderson's *imagined community*. Readers of the site begin to feel connected to queer people from across the world as they read about queer events happening

elsewhere in the world. The creation of this *imagined community* uniting gay.ru's readers from across the world also reflects the central theme of Mikhail Kuzmin's novella and shows that gay.ru also believes that sexuality transcends nationality.

3.6 Gay.ru in the English language

Another way in which gay.ru reflects the globalisation of the queer community is through its English language site. Whilst this site is significantly smaller than the Russian language version, this part of the site is important because it also shows that the Russian queer community has been affected by the globalisation of the queer community. It shows that the site's founders felt the need to have an English-language site to situate it as part of the international queer community. The English-language site allows users from across the world to view and read sections of the site and read about queer life in Russia. Each section of the English site is prefaced with a small introduction to the topic but in the Russian context. For example, figure no. 13, shows the site's introduction to the English-language topic of family, detailing the tradition of the Russian family and advising visitors to Russia on how to act when visiting. Not only does the site give foreign visitors information on queer life in Russia, but also takes pieces on Russia's queer community from Western sources such as *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post.* This part of the site is perhaps aimed at foreigners who have an interest in the Russian queer community.

Figure no. 13 shows the English-language version of the site. Here one can see the contrast between the advert heavy Russian-language site and less commercialised English-site.[16]

[16] Taken from gay.ru's English language website, available at http://english.gay.ru/life/family/ [accessed 15th December 2019].

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that gay.ru and the wider Russian queer community has been affected by the globalisation of queer sexualities. In the beginning, gay.ru arguably reflected the idea that Russian queers rejected the idea of a Western-style queer movement and that the Russian queer community wanted to remain distinct in its organisation and culture. Nowadays, gay.ru appears more open to Western sexual cultures and reports more often on international queer themed events in order to anchor the Russian queer community in the international community. In this way, gay.ru almost proves that many of Laurie Essig's observations about the Russian queer community eyeing the Western queer activists with suspicion are outdated. The site has also globalised in that the site also tends to deploy more Western terms, such as *gei* and *lesbiianka* to describe its readership and community rather than more traditional Russian terms, such as *goluboi* and *rozovaia.* By using these terms, they are making themselves more recognisable to the international queer movement as a queer organisation that models itself on Western magazines and websites. This is also reflected by the commercialisation of the site. Many of the adverts and images used fit the stereotypes of queer men found in American queer magazines and therefore hint that the Russian adverts have been modelled on such examples. I have also shown that gay.ru is itself a product of the West and therefore of the globalisation of sexuality: the inspiration behind gay.ru being a message board encountered in the States.

Gay.ru's internationalism, as I have also pointed out, is nothing particularly new, and has its roots in even the earliest legislation regarding sexuality and queerness in Russia. Taking on the examples of other Western states with regards to the criminalisation of homosexuality and then reversing that in 1993 in order to become a member of the Council of Europe shows that interaction

with other states has affected Russia's stance of sexuality and queerness throughout its history. Russian queer literature has also been influenced by internationalism, with many of the heroes and heroines of key queer novels interacting with and being seduced by Western sexualities and sexual cultures. This influence from Russian earliest queer literation, Mikhail Kuzmin's *Wings,* can also be clearly seen in the way that gay.ru is run. In *Wings* sexuality transcends nationality and on gay.ru's pages this also seems to be true, as gay.ru positions internationally focused stories alongside stories from Russia's own queer community. It is in these ways that gay.ru has become globalised, and perhaps Westernised, by contact with Western queer movements and has become a driving force for the globalisation of the Russian queer community as a whole.

Chapter 4 – Reimagining Russia's Queer Past

This chapter will focus on gay.ru and its attempts to record Russia's queer history and place Russian queers at the heart of Russia's national history. Gay.ru not only provides important information for the queer community on a variety of topics, it also seeks to educate the Russian queer community about the community's history, both throughout the Soviet period and in Imperial Russia. In order to achieve this, gay.ru disseminates articles from a variety of sources including translated versions of foreign-language scholarly articles, informative pieces taken from other sites, and pieces written specially for the site. Many of these pieces can be found in the site's *history* section (a sub-section of the *science* section) and are 'tagged' as relevant to different parts of Russia's history. For example, an article telling the story of a West German gay activist group being invited to Moscow by the Communist Party is tagged as relevant to "article-121", "ussr" "history", and "moscow" ["121 stat'ia", "sssr", "istoriia", "moskva"]. It is because of gay.ru's attempts to educate its readership that I argue that gay.ru seeks to rectify Russia's "memoryless" queer movement.

This is crucial for the Russian queer community, as Dan Healey has identified a 'memoryless LGBT movement' in Russia (2018: 23). He argues that 'without adequate historical research […] the future of Russia's LGBT citizens will be weakened' (Healey, 2018: 23). For Healey, to become full citizens of a nation, a group needs to write their social story into the national history (Healey, 2018: 149). But the difficulty for Russia's queer community is that they are 'struggling to constitute themselves as one of the country's recognised "remembering collectives."' (Healey, 2018: 150). Therefore, in order to become fully accepted by the rest of society, Russia's queer community needs to place its own history as part of the wider national story and memory. I argue that gay.ru is attempting to place the Russian queer community's history

into that of the country's wider national history by collecting together and publishing information on Russia's queer history before, during and after the Soviet Union.

This memoryless-ness, as argued by Healey, has come about because of a general silence surrounding the state persecution of queer people during the Soviet period. Despite the opening of the archives since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there are still 'barriers' which restrict access to relevant materials (Healey, 2018: 150). These barriers, along with a reluctance to write a Russian queer history into the wider national history, mean that the queer community in Russia is struggling to gain recognition as a legitimate 'remembering collective' (Healey, 2018: 150). What has further contributed to the widening of the memory gap in Russia's queer community is the 2013 "gay propaganda law", which severely restricts the community's ability to produce and distribute 'queer knowledge' which would allow the community to place itself within the wider narrative of historical, Soviet persecutions (Healey, 2018: 150).

4.1 Why does nobody remember?

What further contributes to this problem of a memoryless queer movement in Russia is the lack of personal testimonies: very few queer people have written about their experiences of living under the Soviet system. The causes for this are unclear but it perhaps linked to the taboo status of queer people and their experiences and the gay propaganda law of 2013 certainly has not helped the situation. As Dan Healey notes, we know that the number of people punished under Article-121 is somewhere in the thousands, and we only have a few existing personal stories through which we can examine this experience (Healey, 2018: 183-184). If queer people are reluctant to write down their history and their experiences for fear of either being exposed as queer or, in the case of the gay propaganda law, for fear of a legal backlash, then the queer community is going to suffer.

The lack of personal narratives means that queer activists in Russia are struggling further to tie in their own history into that of other remembering collectives (Healey, 2018: 184).

Despite this, however, almost from the moment the Soviet Union began to "democratize" in the 1980s and 1990s, Soviet queers began to "re-construct, preserve, and remember their queer past" (Healey, 2018: 204). The new-found freedoms which flourished under Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost'* and *perestroika* allowed a queer culture to develop and grow. This culture grew further with Yelstin's decriminalisation of homosexuality and further emboldened queer activists resulting in queer memorial organisations sprouting up. For example, activists Elena Gusiantinskaia and Viktor Oboin joined forces to gather together the various mainstream media discussions of homosexuality and the new queer publications that sprung up in this period. Thus, their work as has been invaluable in preserving the numerous queer publications that were being published in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse. This collection of publications, memoirs, and other works has been turned in to The Museum of LGBT History [*Muzei istorii LGBT v Rossii]:* a website through which the visitor can access various articles relating to Russia's queer history. The website and archive seek to create an 'information portal' dedicated to LGBT history.[17] This project has done much to preserve the queer sub-culture that emerged in the 1990s. Here, I argue that gay.ru has also done much to preserve and record incidents of Soviet political terror against queer people, as well as queer culture in general, as it seeks to create an online queer history of Russia.

This inability to remember, or even come to terms with the Soviet past, is also a wider issue within Russian society. Since the collapse of communist rule, the way in which Russia has sought

[17] Taken from the Muzei Istorii LGBT v Rossii website, available at https://lgbtru.com/about/ [accessed 15th December 2019].

to come to terms with its past has proved controversial. As Dan Healey notes there has been no attempt to hold people accountable for the crimes of past regimes. 'There was no "Nuremburg" trial of Stalinism or Communism', Healey notes (2018: 149). In fact, when the Soviet Union collapsed, Yeltsin banned the Soviet Communist Party and confiscated much of its property (Lovell, 2006: 23). This was a missed opportunity for the Party to be made to answer for its past actions and instead no action was taken.

Despite the trauma of the 20th Century, Russia's coming to terms with its past 'is complicated by an accumulation of unaddressed violations of basic rights.' (Smith, 1996: 11). By struggling to come to terms with its past, Russia is making it difficult for any of its remembering collectives to establish themselves as victims. This is partly because of a wide range of views on the Soviet past. For example, over 60% of Russians still regret the collapse of the Soviet Union and 52% of Russians have a 'mostly positive' perception of Stalin (Levada Center, 2018; 2019). In contrast, only 19% of Russians have a negative opinion of Stalin (Levada Center, 2019). This lack of consensus on the Russian/Soviet past makes any attempt at memorialisation more difficult.

However, there have been attempts since the collapse of the Soviet Union to commemorate the violence of the Soviet regime. For example, the NGO *Memorial*, erected a monument in 1990 to the victims of Soviet state violence in Lubyanka Square – opposite the headquarters of the KGB. The Solovetsky Stone, taken from one of the first Soviet labour-camps, serves as a memorial to those who lost their lives across the GULAG system and is a point of mourning for those who lost family members to the system. This monument is one of the few dedicated to Soviet political prisoners but interestingly it was erected by a non-governmental organisation, which suggests that the Russian government does not seek to make amends for the violence suffered by Soviet citizens. Instead it is up to NGOs and other organisations to memorialise the terror suffered under the Soviet

regime and in terms of memorialising queer victims, it is left to queer organisations, who struggle for visibility.

This problem of visibility for queer victims of Soviet political violence is further highlighted when looking at the example of Magadan's memorial to persecuted gay singer, Vadim Kozin. Located in Russia's Far East, it is a life-sized statue dedicated to the city's most famous artist and cultural icon. Yet this monument bears no reference to the reasons for his imprisonment in the Magadan labour colony (Healey, 2018: 197). Instead this monument appeals to only to the cultural memory of Kozin and his impact upon Russia's arts scene (Healey, 2018: 198). Healey argues that this monument had the opportunity to remember both the Stalinist repressions and purges and the way in which queer people were persecuted but instead fails to do either (2018: 198). The erasure of both Kozin's sexuality and his persecution under the Soviet regime further shows the difficulty Russia has with coming to terms with its past. It also shows how Russia's queer community is not having its voice heard in debates surrounding the topic of Soviet state violence and its commemoration.

4.2 Russian history with a "queer eye"

I argue that gay.ru is attempting to fill in this memory gap by producing 'queer knowledge' and writing down Russia's queer history. Gay.ru's section on knowledge (*nauka)* contains a subsection dedicated to the history of Russia's queer community, as well as the history of sexuality in general. Clicking on the section entitled Russia, the reader is presented with a short history of homosexuality in ancient Russia, detailing how 'sodomy' was dealt with more leniently than in the West. The reader is also met with a picture of the three most famous 'bogatyrs', who were legendary medieval knights who appeared in various fairy tales and were famous for their courage,

strength and wit. Whilst gay.ru is not arguing that the three bogatyrs were queer, the site is using a well-known part of Russia's national history and identity to place the history of the Russian queer community into wider national context.

Within this section of the site, the reader can see articles about Russian queer history from Kievan Rus' to the Soviet period and after. The reader can find articles on queer relationships and identities by both Russian and foreign scholars, such as Francesca Stella, Dan Healey, and Igor Kon. It is through such articles that gay.ru, I argue, seeks to educate its readership in the queer history of Russia and write Russia's queer history into the national narrative.

The most popular article in this section is entitled *gomoseksualnost' v Kievskoi Rusi (homosexuality in Kievan Rus).* The introduction to the article focuses on the modern-day argument that homosexuality was introduced to Russia from the West and how this assumption is not supported by historians and ethnographers, who argue that homosexuality has always been present in Russia. The article notes that homosexual behaviour has been noted among ancient Slavs and that homosexual acts were not prohibited by ancient religions and were often part of a young man's route into adulthood. The author goes on to note that it was not until Peter the Great that there were any secular laws prohibiting queer acts and that the relative leniency of church laws on the matter suggest that 'same-sex love' was wide-spread in Russia. This article also attempts to show that same-sex relations were widely featured in Russian fairy tales and folklore, citing the *Fairytale of Boris and Gleb*, where Boris is perceived as having a young male lover. By using examples of queerness from ancient Russian fairy tales and folklore, the author is highlighting the fact that queerness has been prevalent in Russian culture since ancient times. Therefore, they are writing queer people into Russia's national history and, in the words of Dan Healey, seeking to legitimise them as full citizens of Russia. The use of Russian fairy tales also attempts to disprove

the wide-spread, modern myth that homosexuality is a Western import and is un-Russian, as well further exhibit the Russian-ness of a queer sexuality. Therefore, by producing an ancient history of Russia with a 'queer eye', gay.ru is trying to make homosexuality and the queer community more acceptable to those who think of it as un-Russian, by showing that Russia's national history is intertwined with that of its queer community.

This article forms part of a series of articles detailing the history of Russia from a queer perspective. The series takes a period of Russian history, such as the Pre-Petrine period, or the 17th/18th Centuries and details how queer people lived in this period. For example, in the article on the existence of (mainly male) queerness in pre-Petrine Russia, the author draws upon many contemporary sources from priests which describe 'sodomy' as prevalent among Russia's male population at the time. The author also uses foreign sources such as sources written by Western visitors to Russia, who also describe the widespread queer sexual acts between Russian men. Again, the author seeks to correct the idea that queerness is a "Western evil" that has been imported into Russia by Western agents by writing them into the national historical narrative. In a later article, which examines the state's changing attitude towards male queer-sexual acts as part of Peter the Great's Westernising reforms, the author underlines the fact that the laws banning sodomy brought by Peter I followed the "Swedish and Saxon models" of army discipline. By turning the traditional narrative of an imported queer sub-culture, the author is turning queerness into something Russian and is writing queerness into an important chapter of Russian history, thus trying to normalise Russian queers within a historical context and therefore legitimising the Russian queer community.

4.3 Personal narratives of life under Article-121

Whilst it is important for the Russian queer community to be written into the entire national history, it is also important for the Russian queer community's experiences of persecution by the Soviet regime to be recorded. As Dan Healey notes, political violence in the Soviet era was targeted at a "broad spectrum of national, ethnic, social and economic groups" (2018: 149). Each of these has then become a "remembering collective", with each seeking to remember the injustices faced during the era of Soviet repressions. For some remembering collectives it is easier to have their voices heard in the debate surrounding how to remember Soviet political violence. However, for queer Russians it is more difficult because of the current taboo surrounding queer people and queer topics in mainstream Russian media and academia (2018: 150). Gay.ru, I argue, has been vital in seeking out instances where the queer experience of the Soviet Union has been recorded, either by Russian or foreign scholars, and making this information available to the Russian queer community in the Russian language.

One such article in the history section is entitled "*Как жили лесбиянки в СССР" (How lesbians lived in the USSR),* written by Francesca Stella. The article focuses on the lesbian experience in the Soviet Union, looking at both the pathologizing of lesbianism by Soviet psychiatry and lesbian women's experiences of heterosexual relationships to hide their sexuality. Testimonies from lesbian women who lived under the Soviet system appear throughout the text. For example, one woman describes her experience of visiting a psychiatrist during a bout of depression and admitting to her that she was attracted to other women. Upon referral to a sexual health specialist, she is advised to simply 'go to the metro and look at men' (*смотрите на мужчин, едете в метро, смотрите на мужчин).* Another woman discusses how she was caught with a woman in her room by the head of her dormitory. Because of this she was thrown

out of the Komsomol for 'moral corruption' *(Юлию ... обвинили в моральном разложении)*. A third women discusses how the majority of the women she had relationships with ended up marrying men and having children. This purpose of this article is seemingly to educate the readership in the queer female experience of the Soviet Union. As many of these women were persecuted for their sexuality, it is preserving and commemorating the forgotten experiences of queer females under the Soviet system. By translating Stella's research and publishing it on its site, gay.ru is attempting to fill in the memory gap in the history of the queer community in Russia.

The inclusion of these testimonies is also important as eyewitness accounts 'contain[s] an imperative – you too must know, must remember, must bear the marks of the past' (Wallen, 2009: 262). These testimonies, therefore, implore the reader to cast aside previous memory of the Soviet Union and remember the hostile environment for homosexuals as manufactured by the state, thus further establishing female queers as one of the "remembering collectives". In addition, the use of these testimonies aids in building a sense of authenticity about the experiences detailed in the article. Because the article contains testimonies written by lesbian women from the Soviet Union, the reader is 'conditioned' to read the text 'as an authentic presentation' of the experiences of lesbian women in the USSR (Jones, 2014: 113). By making the article and the experiences detailed in it feel more authentic, the author helps create a stronger narrative of memory within the article. This narrative leads the reader to understand the difficult queer experience of the USSR: that queer women had to cope with the pathologization of their sexuality and the difficulty of finding a long-term partner. Thus, the inclusion of these personal narratives helps to establish female queers as one of the "remembering collectives".

Another article that seeks to shed light on the queer (male) experience in the Soviet Union is Dan Healey's "How many people were sentenced for "sodomy" in the USSR" [skol'ko chelovek

osydili za muzhelozhestvo v SSSR]. The article is a translated version of a chapter from Healey's work *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia (2001)* and aims to find out, using archival documents, exactly how many people were punished for 'sodomy' under Article-121. Healey notes in the article that the exact numbers of those sentenced to prison under Article-121 is difficult to determine because of the 'ban' on the study of this topic. Healey's discusses that no-one has been able to access the KGB archives where researchers would be able to find the exact numbers. This discussion of the ban on researching the persecution of Russian queers during the Soviet period, highlights the lack of recognition of queer people as victims of Soviet repressions by the state. By translating and publishing this article, gay.ru is seeking to highlight this lack of recognition and the importance of queer people in Russia recording their history because of this state silence.

Gay.ru also published an article written by journalist Dmitrii Okunev for the newspaper gazeta.ru, which details the circumstances behind the re-criminalisation of male-male sexual acts in 1934. The article makes many references to the fact that male homosexuality was seen as "counter-revolutionary" by the Soviet state as it was corrupting "young people" and turning them away from becoming ideal Soviet citizens. Similarly, the article "*In the USSR Article-121 was a convenient tool to pressure the disloyal intelligentsia"* also portrays the use of Article-121 as a purely political tool. The article quotes historian Timofei Rakov in an interview with news-website news.ru, who argues that Article-121 could be 'easily manipulated' and that it would often be used as a 'tool to pressure the disloyal intelligentsia'.

Articles such as these are important for the recognition of queer people as a distinct remembering collective as they document the political terror suffered by them. The articles from gazeta.ru and news.ru show how politicised the implementation and the use of Article-121 were, cementing queer Russians as victims of Soviet-era political repression. Stella's article points out

that queer women were subjected to the medicalisation of their sexual identity and that they were classified as mentally ill by the state. Healey's article points out that thousands of men were documented to have been punished for their sexuality and it also points out that much of the archival data is incomplete or inaccessible, resulting in many more thousands of victims being forgotten.

Gay.ru, I believe, does not quite go far enough to record and document the queer Soviet experience. On the site itself there are very few texts which explicitly deal with personal testimonies of the repression faced under the Soviet period. In order to further rectify the memoryless-ness of the Russian queer community the site needs to collect and publish personal testimonies of how Soviet queer people lived. Only then will the memory of how queer people lived under the Soviet Union and what violence and terror (or, indeed lack of) they experienced survive.

4.4 Queer nostalgia for the Soviet Union

Whilst gay.ru firmly cements queer people as a distinct remembering collective who deserve to be remembered as victims of Soviet political violence, the site arguably also attempts to create a certain image of the Soviet Union in readers' minds. Nostalgia for the Soviet past is ever-present in modern-day Russia. Recent surveys (conducted in 2018) have shown that 66% of respondents regret the collapse of the USSR (Levada Centre: 2018). Studies have shown that these nostalgic feelings vary by age, with older people generally harbouring more nostalgic feelings for the Soviet Union than younger generations of Russians (Levada Centre, 2018; Sullivan, 2013). Wealth also determines how nostalgic for the Soviet past people feel: the lower the income the more positive the opinion of the USSR (Sullivan, 2013: 4, table 2). Many people who regret the

Soviet Union's collapse miss the state's social guarantees such as free healthcare and education, housing and employment (Kasmara and Sorokina, 2011).

Instead, on gay.ru, the reader is presented with the image of a repressive regime that persecuted people based on who they loved and their political beliefs. Within gay.ru's various historical articles, one can read about the politicised nature of Article-121, the pathologisation of female sexuality and the hostile environment in which queer people lived during the Soviet Union. What we can perhaps take from the negative memories of the Soviet era that are presented on gay.ru is that Russian queer people do not see the Soviet Union as positively as their 'straight' compatriots, and perhaps not positively at all. In terms of its historical content and the articles it publishes, gay.ru is a "disparate collection of texts", a phrase used by Sara Jones in her examination of a collection of personal testimonies of prisoners from the East German Stasi's prison *Hohenschönhausen* (Jones, 2014: 90). She argues that the texts collected in *Gefangen in Hohenschönhausen* bear no reference to each other but instead they are 'presented as one product, to be read as a cohesive whole' in order to create a negative narrative of the Stasi (Jones, 2014: 90-91). I argue that gay.ru functions similarly. As the site has collected various articles relating to the Soviet past, I argue that the site contains "disparate" texts which create the narrative of a repressive and not-queer-friendly Soviet Union. Whether intentionally or not, the site's controllers are perhaps attempting to create a negative collective memory in the minds of the Russian queer community, even if individual members of the queer community in Russia may have a positive memory of the Soviet Union.

It is also interesting to note that many of the articles used by gay.ru to create this collective memory of the Soviet Union have not actually been written specifically by the site. Out of the ten most popular articles linked in the history section, only one of them was written specifically for

gay.ru. Instead, the nine others were translated fragments of books or were articles taken from other news sources such as gazeta.ru or the BBC Russian Service. Arguably, all the articles written about the Soviet Union were originally purposed to educate the reader about the history of Soviet queer people and not to disseminate a memory, whether positive or negative, of the Soviet Union. In this way, I argue that gay.ru has 'repurposed' many of these texts in order to help shape the memory of the Soviet Union in the reader's minds (Erll & Rigney, 2009: 5). For example, Francesca Stella's article *"How lesbians lived in the USSR"* was originally written to expose how queer women managed their sexual desires and how they reacted to state interventions in their private lives: therefore, the article was written with an educative purpose. Instead, gay.ru has used the article to both educate but also to make the readers realise how terrible it was to live under the Soviet system as a queer woman, and therefore produce a negative collective memory of the Soviet Union.

Gay.ru, however, does not just repurpose articles in order to create its ideal collective memory of the Soviet Union. It also invites prominent scholars to submit articles specifically written for the site. One such article is entitled *Soviet Homophobia,* by prominent Russian sexologist Igor Kon.[18] The article, written in English and appearing on the English-language section of the website, discusses the origins of Soviet homophobia within the context of Soviet medical science and gives an overview of the history of Soviet homosexuality. In Kon's text he describes the 'tragedy of Soviet homosexuals, who not only faced prosecution and blackmail...' and how young queer women were subjected to a 'forced treatment with mind-altering

[18] Available on gay.ru's English language site at, http://english.gay.ru/life/history/moonlightlove/SovietHomophobia.html [accessed 15th December 2019].

medication'. (The latter being a quote from a young queer woman interviewed by jounralist Masha Gessen.) Kon also describes how the Soviet state and its medical literature described homosexuality as 'a social harm' and as a 'perversion'. The way Kon uses a mixture of quotes from published Soviet medical literature and real-life testimonies invokes the image of a harsh environment for Soviet queers where one could not be one's true self for fear of persecution or violence. Thus, because this article was written specifically for gay.ru, it could be said that the author is trying to tell the reader how one should remember the Soviet Union: as a place where queer people were not free to be themselves.

4.5 Conclusion

Gay.ru, as well as other queer organisations and movements in Russia today are faced with a lack of recognition: as citizens and as people with their own history and cultural identity. In Russia, there exists a memory gap, where Russian queers are unable to have their voices heard in the national debate on Russia's history. In order to be seen as full citizens, as Dan Healey argues, Russian queers need to record their history and successfully tie it in with Russia's national history. Gay.ru has taken the opportunity to write down Russia's queer history. Articles detailing the history of queer people in Russia and the earliest recorded occurrences of same-sex love in Russian culture appear on gay.ru's pages. One such article is the history of homosexuality in Kievan Rus' where the author records incidents of same-sex love occurring in Russia's national folklore and fairy tales, such as the *Fairytale of Boris and Gleb.* This cements the Russian queer community in Russia's ancient history and its folk culture and helps to dispel the myth that same-sex desire in the country is a modern, Western import. The series continues and details the queer experience in Russia right up to the revolution and provides a place in Russia's history for its queer community.

Gay.ru has documented the experience of queer people during the Soviet era, when same-sex love was seen as counterrevolutionary, a perversion, and a social harm. While there is a mainstream silence surrounding the persecution of queer people under the Soviet regime, gay.ru seeks to rectify this by telling the Soviet queer story. Rather than allowing the Soviet queer experience to be forgotten by a heteronormative reading of history by Russia's academic community, gay.ru is translating and disseminating notable works by foreign scholars such as Dan Healey and Francesca Stella. By using these scholarly articles and recording the Soviet queer experience, gay.ru seeks to place queer people as a distinct 'remembering collective' within the wider debate on how Soviet political violence should be remembered. Through this it is giving a voice to the voiceless queer community in Russia that is struggling to have its past traumas recognised by the state and the wider community. By giving a voice to Russia's queer community, the website is successfully writing its community's story into the national narrative and helping queer Russians to become 'full citizens'.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

This work has shown how important gay.ru is for the Russian queer community. From early in the site's history, it has focused on bringing together queer people from across Russia. The site's section *ishchu druga [searching for a friend]* allowed users to post adverts from their city and province in order to find like-minded people for friendship, sex, or love. During the Soviet era, Moscow and St Petersburg served as the major queer cities. These cities possessed a number of queer spaces, such as clubs, bars, cafes, and cruising areas where the members of the queer community could clandestinely meet. Smaller cities outside of these areas often contained little or no queer community and *ishchu druga* helps to solve that problem by allowing queer people from smaller cities in Russia and the former Soviet Union to connect with others nearby and form a queer community there. However, in the sections for smaller cities such as Izhevsk and Samara, very few adverts appeared suggesting that *ishchu druga's* reach did not quite go far enough. This is also reflected in other sections on the modern day version of the website where some cities contain more information on their queer spaces than others, which also suggests that the site is more popular within the larger cities.

Whilst gay.ru has sought to unite its users through the internet, the site also allows the community to develop offline. Through its *siti-gid [city guide]* section the site and its users have attempted to collect together information on the queer spaces available offline in cities across Russia and the former Soviet Union. In these sections, the user can find information on queer clubs, cultural events and other areas that have a specifically queer orientation. Here queer people living in or just visiting these cities have the opportunity to connect with and become part of the offline queer community. Due to this section and the advertising contained within it, the site has helped

to advertise the queer spaces and communities in smaller cities which has led to the growth of the queer community in smaller cities.

Gay.ru also succeeds, to some extent, in creating a safe space for the queer community to express themselves and their sexuality. By interacting with the site anonymously, users avoid the potential risky offline queer spaces where they could potentially face homophobic violence and other forms of persecution. By moving the queer community online, the site is helping to keep the community safe from the 'specific crimes' that queer people may be victim to by going to cruising spots and other offline spaces. However, the anonymity of gay.ru presents a danger of its own, as users may not be aware of who they are talking to. The site attempts to mitigate this risk by providing users with tips on staying safe when meeting someone online. In one article, the site recommends not sharing too much personal information when talking online and recommends making contact with potential partners beforehand using a different medium, such as by a phone call or video chat.

Despite gay.ru promoting itself as the *Russian server of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people*, the site can also be seen as aimed mainly at queer men. When the visitor logs into the site they are presented with glossy images of young men on almost every main page of the site, suggesting that the site sees its readership as a mainly queer male one. Even the site's BBS system seems to suggest that gay.ru is used more widely by queer men as the queer female specific pages are empty of adverts, whereas the queer male section is full of adverts searching for partners. However, much of the language used by gay.ru in its various sections suggest that the site is aimed at all members of the community as gender neutral language is often used when discussing queer people in the context of the article. Despite the gender neutral language, gay.ru is visibly very male

dominated in its imagery, which perhaps puts off a large sector of the queer community and does not make it a safe space for all.

This work has also shown that gay.ru has been affected by the globalisation of queer cultures and sexualities. Gay.ru acts as an agent in this by placing the Russian queer community within the global queer community by displaying news relating to queer events from across the globe on their website. By exposing Russian queer people to queer news and events, gay.ru therefore places their users as members of this international queer community thereby making Russian queers 'global queers'.

Over the past several decades, research (Altman, Jackson and Plummer) has shown that Western ideas of queerness and the queer ideal have begun to spread across the globe to non-Western nations. Not only are glossy images of Western-looking men dominating queer advertising, queer spaces across the globe are becoming more and more commercialised and queer night clubs and bars are popping up across the world. Gay.ru reflects this globalisation through the advertising that takes place on the site. Large images advertising a range of stylish fashion and sex items adorn the site reflecting the wider assertion that queer culture, especially queer male culture, has become increasingly commercialised. These adverts are also interesting as they reflect queer American advertising trends and often display white, muscular, hairless men, which broadcast the ideal queer male to gay.ru's users. By displaying these images to a Russian queer audience, who are perhaps seeking to establish themselves as members of the community, these images suggest that they should become like the ideal American queer person and therefore gay.ru acts as an agent of the Westernisation of the Russian queer community.

The increased globalisation of queer cultures has even affected language. In some cultures, even the traditional words for queer sexualities are being replaced by forms of the English language

words *gay, lesbian, and transgender.* This work has shown that this phenomenon is true even in Russia. The globalisation of gay.ru has seen the site refer to queer people using Russian transliterations of Western terms, such as *gei,* and *lesbiianka,* in favour of the 'traditional' Russian words *goluboi* and *rozovaia*, further showing that gay.ru has become part of the global queer community.

This work also shows that gay.ru seeks to place the Russian queer community within Russia's national history and story. Dan Healey noted that in order to become 'full citizens' of a state, a group needs to write their own history into the wider national history. This work has shown that gay.ru has attempted to write Russian queers into Russian national history and has re-written Russia's history with a queer eye. A series of works detailing the history of Russian queer identities from the ancient Kievan Rus' to the modern era has placed Russian queers at the heart of Russian history. These stories have also helped to re-write the modern assertion that queer identities are a 'Western import' and therefore place Russian queer subjectivities in the heart of Russian culture.

Gay.ru has also sought to establish the Russian queer community as a distinct remembering collective within the context of the violent Soviet past. In the years after the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia has struggled to come to terms with how this past should be remembered. Some groups believe it should be glorified, whereas others seek to remember the political violence and state terror that occurred under the Soviet regime. Gay.ru, I have shown, has sought to remember the state persecution and terror faced by the queer community by collecting scholarly and journalistic articles which record the violence and terror faced by Soviet queer people and making them available for its readership. However, gay.ru could arguably do more by actively collecting personal testimonies of the Soviet queer experience from its readership in order to archive people's memories of their Soviet past and experiences.

This project has also shown how gay.ru seeks to influence how queer people in Russia should remember the Soviet Union. Most, if not all, of the articles that discuss the Soviet past seek to portray the Soviet Union in a negative way. The articles collected by gay.ru, which originally sought to educate readers as to the Soviet queer experience (such as those written by Francesca Stella and Dan Healey), have been repurposed to present a negative image of the Soviet Union. In this way, gay.ru is actively seeking to influence the way in which its readers remember the Soviet past.

This dissertation has thus filled in a gap by examining Russia's largest queer-themed website as a community builder and as an agent of queer globalisation and remembering Russia's queer past. However, following on from this dissertation more work needs to be done on examining the Russian queer community itself. How does the community survive in the present political situation? Do queer people feel part of a wider Russian queer community, or do queer people still feel that a queer community needs to be built further? As gay.ru has been affected by the gay propaganda law, it would also be interesting to examine how queer movements and activists promote queer rights when they are restricted by what information they can produce.

The question of gay.ru's globalisation and commercialisation has also thrown up some new questions It would also prove interesting to see how everyday Russian queers have been affected by the increased commercialisation and globalisation of the queer community as seen on gay.ru. Do Russian queer people see themselves as part of a global queer community as gay.ru does? Have they also become as commercialised as the adverts suggest? The issue of memory and the queer community also needs more research. For example, how do queer people remember the Soviet Union and does their sexuality and the experiences faced by the community impact upon this memory? This research question is the subject of the author's proposed PhD project, and has

broader implications for the overall impact of sexuality on memory and collective memories within remembering collectives.

Beginning as a message board in the early 1990s, gay.ru has grown to become Russia's largest queer-themed website. Containing a wealth of information on queer lifestyles, queer history, and queer events, the site provides Russian queers with a place a to explore their sexuality safely and anonymously. So, whilst many queer journals and publications came and went in 1990s Russia, gay.ru stood the test of time and has evolved with it. But with the rise of social media and (queer) dating apps, can gay.ru survive and continue to provide for a new, younger generation of Russian queers? Or can we already start to think of gay.ru as a reflection of what is what like for Russian queers in the 1990s and 2000s? For Russian queers, however, the present, past and future are bleak, but by researching the Russian queer community and its past we can begin to see and understand how it continues to thrive in such repressive political environments.

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